

**The Poetics of the Non-Verbal:
Code and Performance in
Jean Genet's Theatre**

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Abstract

This is an extensive study of the non-verbal in Genet's dramaturgy. Non-verbal forms constitute the plural, fragmented sum of theatrical possibility. Rhythms, movements, colours and shapes highlight the ritualised form of words and actions on and off stage.

In Part One I define my understanding of Genet's theory of representation, and show how this theory informs his use of the non-verbal. On the one hand the discursive limits of Genet's reality forefront closure. On the other, within this closure an absence of transcendental meaning enables signs to be reconfigured and accorded a plurality of signification. A wealth of non-verbal scenic elements is codified and made to signify. But an antagonism between the triumphant liberation from inherent meaning and the inevitable falsity of representation underlies all Genet's theatre.

Genet's reconfiguration involves transubstantiation, not substitution. It adds a supplementary layer of falsity to the sign. The co-presence of multiple layers of artifice effects a duality of belief and disbelief in the spectator, redefining the notion of theatricality. Non-verbal forms are of existential as well as theatrical import. Falsity is omnipresent. Genet thus destabilises and redramatises security, possession and identity.

Part Two develops and illustrates the notion of the non-verbal elaborated in Part One through a predominantly stylistic study. I illustrate how performance on Genet's stage is a surface made of ritualised gestures and words, devoid of substance. Through constant polyphonic shifting characterisation is fragmented and unity of voice is denied. Central acoustic matrices are expanded forming homogenous blocks of repeated words, phonemes, stresses and prosodies. These blocks are juxtaposed with other rhythms creating chains of antagonistic structures that fracture traditional diegesis. Actors' gestures, tone, pitch, tempo and costume display a hybrid heterogeneity of styles which abolishes the monolithism of identity. The horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines constituting the set create a lattice network that fills a hypothetical *vide* with Genet's panoramic definition of reality. All these material signifiers resist metaphorical globalisation into themes or characters. They subsequently afford an opacity that fractures action into immediate acoustic and visual effects, and underscores form as surface detached from the oppressiveness of substance. And yet the absence of substance merely underscores the falsity of Genet's success.

My concluding comments state that material, non-verbal artifice is freed from essentialist signification. It is therefore mobile, not static. The plural and liberated nature of the non-verbal enables Genet's singularity to be expressed, and in turn allows for the singularity of the spectator.

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Introduction

Les légendes gothiques parlent de saltimbanques qui, n'ayant pas autre chose, offraient à la vierge leurs tours. Devant la cathédrale ils dansaient.

Jean Genet, *Le Funambule*¹

The non-verbal - sound, rhythm, colour and form - constitutes the artifice out of which Genet's poetic of representation is constructed. This non-verbal materiality makes up the plural, fragmented sum of theatrical possibilities that Genet exploits in the names of non-exclusion and dramatic efficacy.

The carnival of material forms on Genet's stage dramatises a paradoxical refusal of closure within the parameters of closure. Genet explains: 'De la chambre de Madame à la prison, mon 'boulot' tourne toujours autour du même problème. Dans la pièce que je termine en ce moment, ce sera la même chose : on n'a jamais qu'un grand problème à résoudre...'². Genet's dramaturgy is concerned with the attempt to represent the discourses that shape our lives. This single problem of poetic representation subtends his entire literary oeuvre. His use of the non-verbal is born out of his attempt at poetic representation, and serves to construct this representation. For Genet, our lives are the product of social construct. His self-consciously assembled theatrical creations therefore mirror the discursivity of our existence. On Genet's stage gesture is revealed to be ceremony, utterance to be roleplay, signs to be artifice. Our existence subsists within the bounds of inherited, established rituals. The discursive limits of Genet's world forefront and freely admit to closure. And yet within these necessary bounds of artifice, the absence of any essential transcendental meaning liberates signs, enabling a plurality of potential signification. Monolithic form is fractured into a plural wealth of possibility. I choose to concentrate on Genet's theatre as opposed to on his novelistic works, for the

¹ Jean Genet, *Le Funambule* (Décines: Marc Barbezat - L'arbalète, 1958), p. 29.

² Jean Genet, 'L'Intransigeant', *Paris-Presse*, 24 February 1949, p. 4.

theatre, more than any other art medium offers Genet a panorama of objects to reinscribe with new meaning. It replaces logocentrism with democratisation through its multiplication of expression modes.

The plurality of heterogeneous material forms that inhabit Genet's stage is a mode of inquiry that produces the basis of my hybrid theoretical premise. Different aspects of the non-verbal solicit different approaches. 'Le théâtre allait offrir à Genet la possibilité de mettre en jeu une image plurielle, plus nuancée, de lui-même' writes Armand Malgorn in *Jean Genet, Qui êtes-vous?*¹ Through its opacity the signifier - sound, rhythm, colour, movement - on Genet's stage incurs its own destabilisation, resisting isotopic globalisation and fracturing action into immediate acoustic and visual effects. These effects solicit an evaluation of Genet's work via its relation to its own form, rather than to any one intrinsic theme, whether biographical, as Malgorn might wish, or other. An awareness of the non-essence of all signs must be maintained as the starting point of any analysis of Genet, for the only unifying paradigm in Genet's theatre is the absence of any inherence or transcendental meaning. Therefore, no single extrinsic model of evaluation or critical formula can adequately contain the non-verbal in Genet's theatre. The very fragmentation of material forms informs the theoretical reading of those forms. If plurality and a refusal of closure are the inevitable conclusion of Genet's proliferation of rhythms, colours, gestures and shapes, then rather than attempting to contain this mobility within a single theoretical framework, a treatment of each medium in his theatre as singular and different is more appropriate, in order to bear witness to the fragmentation of both his text and its performance. I therefore hybridise my method of analysis instead of remaining faithful only to one single critical approach. By adopting an unfixed standpoint *vis-à-vis* Genet's theatre, I intentionally do not disenable other critical readings of the author. This in itself would constitute another form of closure. Although for example the non-verbal elements of Genet's dramatic oeuvre, frequently neglected in critiques of his theatre, demand their own critical appraisal, it is clear that the verbal aspect continues to play a central part in Genet's drama².

¹ Arnaud Malgorn, *Jean Genet, Qui êtes-vous?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1988), p. 70.

² cursory references to acoustic and visual form in Genet's theatre have been made by critics, directors and journalists, as my following examples illustrate: Philip Thody speaks of Genet's strong feeling for verbal rhythm (*Jean Genet. A Study of his Novels and Plays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1968)); Peter Stein writes of the primordial importance played by the material in his own 1984 production of *Les Nègres*; Laura Oswald alludes to the 'staccato rhythm' of *Les Nègres* (Laura Oswald, *Jean Genet and the*

A framework must be constructed even if I multiply my viewpoints. Genet's literary and theoretical works are interdependent, each firmly based in the internal history of his creative endeavour to address the 'problem' that underlies all his work, namely the nature of artistic representation. I therefore derive my understanding of Genet's poetic predominantly from an interpretation of the author's methods of representation, elaborated implicitly throughout his oeuvre. Even though Genet rarely comments on his own works, his analyses of the poetics of representation in artists such as Rembrandt and Giacometti constitute an invaluable insight into just what the author understands by the human condition, and how he embodies this definition of the human in art form. I discuss Genet's 'theoretical' texts in order to establish my own understanding of his poetic: *Lettres à Roger Blin*; *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*; *Le Funambule*; *L'Enfant criminel*, and the articles, 'Quatre heures à Chatila', 'L'Etrange mot d'...', 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes' and 'Le Secret de Rembrandt'¹. The corpus I have chosen includes all eight of Genet's plays, anthumously or posthumously published, completed or incomplete: *Haute surveillance*, *Les Bonnes*, *Le Balcon*, *Elle*, *Splendid's*, *Le Bagne*, *Les Nègres*, and *Les Paravents*². I compare *Haute surveillance*, *Les Bonnes*, *Le Balcon* and *Les Paravents* with the earlier editions Genet wrote before he published the final versions³. The comparison between editions constitutes an invaluable insight into how the plays were staged, as Genet often revised and reworked plays in response to their productions. The fruitful oscillation between various versions of each play promises new

Semiotics of Performance (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1989), p. 135); Bertrand Poirot-Delpech refers to *Les Paravents* as 'le sensualisme lyrique' ('Le Simulacre absolu', *Le Monde*, 4 April 1991) and Richard Coe describes *Les Nègres* in terms of music and dance (Richard Coe, *The Vision of Genet* (London: Peter Owen, 1968)). None of these authors provide any form of definition of the non-verbal in Genet's theatre. Nor do any substantially follow their comments with detailed reference to Genet's texts.

¹ All the texts I have selected are both of literary, and theoretical worth. For this reason I employ them in my attempt to define the poetics of the non-verbal in Genet's oeuvre. Moreover, as Genet states in *Lettres à Roger Blin*, 'bien sûr j'ignore tout du théâtre en général, mais j'en sais assez sur le mien' (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 62. The most relevant theory to apply to Genet's theatre is via an interpretation of the author's own approach to theory.

² Brian Gordon Kennelly highlights the differing degrees of completion of Genet's three posthumously published plays, *Elle*, *Splendid's*, and *Le Bagne*. According to his analysis of Genet's correspondences with editors, he concludes that *Splendid's* is complete, *Elle* is 'properly unfinished', for it was the author's express intention that it remain incomplete, and *Le Bagne* is genuinely incomplete. (*Tracing Incompletion in Jean Genet's Posthumously Published Plays* (Amsterdam - Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997)). Because I study fragments of form in this dissertation, I feel that the incompleteness of certain plays does not impede my analysis of the play.

³ See bibliography for versions.

discoveries. Genet's central problem poetic definition and representation spans his entire dramaturgy. However, Genet's plays themselves and the opus in its entirety do not form a coherent or chronological whole. Self-conscious emphasis on material form rather than content produces fragmented collections of disparate non-verbal signs that do not serve exclusively to advance linear exegesis, diegetic plot or character development. This affords me the liberty to treat examples of Genet's use of acoustic, rhythmic and visual form in isolation, with relative disregard for theme, diegesis and chronology.

Chapter One, 'The Non-Verbal and Plurality', points to the desire to imprint socially constructed discourses with singularity. I refer briefly to feminist theory in order to introduce the notion of non-verbal form in theatre as non-discriminatory plurality. The foregrounding of *all* scenic elements, whether verbal, acoustic or visual, disregards hierarchy and prioritisation. This process of levelling out incorporates difference instead of excluding it. I explain that theatre, which presents a vast repertory of symbols - rhythms, colour, shapes and gesture - is the optimum site for Genet to stage his poetic of non-exclusion.

My second chapter, 'Materiality: Substance or Surface?' seeks to define Genet's concept of the texts that shape our lives and the theatrical discourses that represent these texts. This enables me to discuss the part played by non-verbal forms in Genet's theatrical poetics of representation. I contrast Genet's use of materiality with that of Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook and The Living Theatre, the works of which Genet's theatre is often compared with. I dissociate Genet's recentring of performance around *mise-en-scène* and spectacle from any endeavour to overcome the inevitable artifice of codified language and to uphold the freeplay of the signifier, this apparently being the intention of certain advocates of the non-verbal, notably Artaud and his school. In Genet's scenic world theatricality takes the place of authenticity, the mask takes the place of the face, repetition takes the place of creation. Genet's concept of existence being only in terms of social discourses is best illustrated in theatre, which itself is a series of repeated actions and scripted words.

Chapter Three, 'Duality and Theatricality', illustrates the manner in which Genet exploits the non-essentialist relationship between the signifier and the signified in order to reconfigure every element on his stage. Meaning is reproduced in performativity. The

image is not an immutable presence. It constitutes an interplay between a multiplicity of constantly shifting interpretative positions. In a study that borrows from semiotic theory I stress that reconfiguration for Genet is transubstantiation, not substitution. Genet adds layers of artifice instead of removing them. The co-presence of multiple layers of falsity effects in the spectator a dual state of belief and disbelief reminiscent of the Eucharist, which Genet elects as the primary site of theatricality. The spectator is both convinced by Genet's creations, and reminded constantly of their artifice. This duality is not only of theatrical significance, but also of existential import, for the spectator must accept that reality is nowhere and falsity, ceremony and illusion reign. Genet thus destabilises and redramatises permanence and identity.

Having defined materiality in terms of plurality, artifice and a dual state that engenders theatrical effect, in Part Two I analyse closely Genet's exploitation of the non-verbal to these various ends. My fourth chapter, 'Polyphony and Ceremony', defines action on Genet's stage and in Genet's world as repeated ceremony. I illustrate how characters speak exclusively in terms of roleplay. Employing the theory of polyphony, I demonstrate the manner in which Genet splits the speaking subject into multiple and conflicting polyphonic voices. This is illustrated by analysing Genet's use of interruption and intonational modification to denote incessant polyphonic shifting. The detailed examination leads me to show how roles are transferred from character to character, and any psychological profile is effectively ruled out through combination with a diversity of 'character'-creating styles. The role becomes of more significance than the character playing it, emphasising the material signifier over the semantic or thematic signified. I conclude by arguing that though Genet is sometimes accused of leaving his fragmented characters and plot without any coherent message, thus reneging social responsibility, he nonetheless unites the audience in a common knowledge of the instability and falsity of all representation. He thus affords signification beyond the immediacy of his fragmented artistic creation.

In Chapter Five, 'Rhythmic Structures and Incantation: Non-essentialism as Essence', I show the antagonistic syntagmatic dynamics at play across Genet's verbal texts. On the one hand central acoustic matrices are expanded to constitute chains of repeated words, phonemes stresses and prosodies that generate an impression of unity. On the other these homogenous blocks are juxtaposed with a multitude of varied

rhythmic structures, creating a sense of fragmentation. I stress that this fragmentation dislocates the signifier from the signified. The rhythmic structures are hence often not metaphorical and are consequently afforded an opacity which in turn foregrounds form as opposed to content. I align rhythmic incantation with transubstantiation, developing Genet's concept of the Eucharist introduced in Chapter Three, by defining incantatory prose as the multiple presence of discernible layers of the signifier and signified. I highlight the theatrical effects that this duality affords the spectator, and in addition show how rhythmic structures are a physical acoustic presence that incorporates the spectator into the shared multi-dimensional concrete present: the auditorium.

In my final chapter, 'Production and Performance', I attempt to illustrate the way in which some of the characteristics I discover to be inherent in Genet's use of rhythmic structures can also be applied to his use of set and to the actor's performance. I define Genet's actors and set exclusively in terms of artifice. I refer to the theoretical works of dramaturgists, directors and theatre companies who have staged Genet's works, and to reviews of productions, in order to gain a better understanding of performance and production in the author's theatre. My interpretation of the texts and my observations on productions lead me to conclude that despite apparent superficial similarities between acting styles in Genet and in the Artaudian school, differences are radical. For Genet, the actor is a blank page upon which fictions and codified praxis are projected. Unlike the theatres of Artaud and his disciples, on Genet's stage gesture, tone, vocal pitch, tempo and costume are a clownesque, hybrid combination of heterogeneous styles that illustrate the multitude of sources that compose the individual. Actor and character are portrayed as the transvestite co-presence of layer upon layer of artifice. In the same way as rhythmic structures, set, gesture and costume resist metaphor, thus further enforcing the impression of the signifier as form devoid of content. The only common thread that unifies the *mélange* of disparate elements is their falsity.

I conclude by stating that on the one hand Genet describes the socialised being's reality in terms of form and illusion. On the other however, this form remains unfixed. It is freed from transcendental essentialist signification and can therefore be reconfigured in a multiplicity of ways. This mobility enables Genet's singularity to be expressed and to resist the absurdity of mortality. In turn, Genet's wholly free and pluralistic theatrical events embrace and celebrate the singularity of the spectator.

If the form of this dissertation appears to be subjected to a certain turbulence, I can attribute this effect to my subject of analysis. The terms of Genet's own aesthetic production have inevitably affected the structure of my study¹. The opacity of the signifier, that often resists metaphorical configuration, produces a unique set of challenges that both liberate and limit the analyst of Genet's works. The tension between the centrifugal, isolated poetic moments and a centripetal pole of essential meaning, namely the absence of essential meaning, appears in part to have determined the momentum of my study. Genet often refuses to attribute metaphorical signification to his rhythms, colours, sounds and shapes. On the one hand this allows readers/spectators to construct their own intricate way through the maze of potential correspondences that Genet leaves unwoven. Genet thus affords endows any partaker of his theatre with a privileged potential democratisation of viewpoints. The advantage of this relative interpretative freedom lies in the fact that my sustained concentration on Genet's theatre has never exhausted the possibility for renewal and creative interpretation. On the other hand, because Genet refuses any kind of closure, definitions of his poetic of representation and of the part played by the non-verbal in this poetic, must be definitions in progress, and must be arrived at by sometimes circumlocutionary and tentative means. An awareness of the non-essential quality of all form must be maintained as the starting point of analysis, for the only pillar that does not crumble in Genet's landscape is the absence of transcendental meaning. Dogmatic declarations on Genet's works would be spurious and I prefer my definitions to be malleable rather than categorical.

Another challenge posed by a study of Genet's theatre derives from the double trend implicit in the dramatist's works. In one respect his plays are made up of disparate, clashing, unique poetic visual and acoustic moments that each solicit the reader/spectator's attention in their own way. In another respect all these dissipated, stratified, differentiated and dispersed elements serve the same purpose. They serve to solve the same problem. Their overt artifice underscores the ritualistic ceremony of our socialised existence. All roads lead in the same direction. The spectators/readers are at

¹ In this dissertation by 'aesthetic' I in no way wish to imply a dilettantine preoccupation with 'art for art's sake' in the manner of an Aubrey Beardsley or a Frederic Leighton. I define 'aesthetic' as the concern with form in the process of representation.

liberty to choose the method of travel, the route taken, which window to look out of and who to travel with. But the destination of the journey is the same every time. Whilst interrogating the style of Genet's mode of representation, it appears that this endeavour has itself interrogated my own *modus operandi*. My study displays a centrifugal, non-linear juxtaposition of examples, illustrations, impressions and thoughts which I approach from various methodological stances. I do not present the reader as such with an argument that progresses in unfurling stages to a logical conclusion. I feel this non-linear hybridity is faithful to the nature of Genet's dramatic works. I treat each aspect of his theatre uniquely and yet these aspects can all be summarised with simplicity, as I return to the same questions of human specificity and its poetic representation at every instant. Genet's theatre turns on itself like the tumblers in my epigraph who perform their somersaults for the Virgin Mary because they have nothing else to offer her. The indisputable aesthetic appeal of Genet's theatrical acrobatics constitutes a veritable source of inspiration, humour, interest and scope. The somersaults can be interpreted as religious adulation, as recreation, as entertainment, as tradition... But beyond Genet's poetic moments, he offers nothing but his perception of existence as illusion, artifice and ceremony. Costume, gesture, set, colour, rhythmic patterns and for that matter all Genet's signs are key elements in his idiom of artifice. Like a somersaulting acrobat Genet's theatre subsists in perpetual quotation of its own artifice.

*

Part One

Chapter One

The Non-verbal and Plurality

Genet is situated within a literary tradition which has at its heart the search for a representation of our identity. In *Le Dernier Genet* Hadrien Laroche writes: ‘fable religieuse et mythe de la race se nouent chez Genet comme souci de l’origine’¹. Genet’s theatre is something of an ontological adventure. He endeavours to understand and to represent the human condition. He achieves this with the aid of his non-verbal theatrical forms.

Genet begins to write his plays in the 1930’s. His theatre is born into a climate of war, political and economic instability, and uncertainty for the future. The western world is overshadowed by a bankruptcy of ideologies. Past models of stability, whether religion, Marxism, fascism, militarism or nationalism, lie shattered. In a new world the former status quo is capsized by lightning-speed industrialisation and constantly threatened peace. People are severed from religious and metaphysical roots and are no longer able to accept an all-embracing transcendental explanation in one totalising religious or political system. The resultant effect on philosophy and art is a search for alternative archetypes, for a reintegration of the individual into a whole, all-embracing cosmogony. The lack of a unifying symbolic seems to encourage writers to transform their works into mythologies, into a search for a truth, unity, eternity, salvation, or in Genet’s case, at least an explanation. Manifestations of the desire to become centripetally orientated around a re-edified model of unity, whether past, present or future, are apparent in 20th-century French literature and notably in French theatre, the principal consideration of which appears to be to ‘résoudre [...] ce retrait de l’origine et cette crise de l’identité’, as Monique Borie explains in *Mythe et théâtre aujourd’hui. Une Quête Impossible?*². The expression ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, coined by Martin Esslin, refers to

¹ Hadrien Laroche, *Le Dernier Genet* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), p. 51.

² Monique Borie, *Mythe et théâtre aujourd’hui. Une Quête Impossible? - Beckett - Genet - Grotowski - Le Living Theatre* (Paris: Nizet, 1981), p. 12.

endeavours by Adamov, Ionesco, Beckett and Genet to lay bare the incongruities and metaphysical anguish of the Sisyphean perpetual cycle of life, suffering and death without a god or any immutable essence of meaning¹. Other dramaturgical schools claim to recentre the individual around new models of purpose. The Surrealists, for example Artaud, regenerate meaning by shattering traditional social symbols; Claudel's plays raise religious consciousness; the *Théâtre engagé* of Sartre, Camus and Salacrou provides reason and structure for our otherwise indeterminate existence by integrating the individual through political commitment.

In Genet's theatre of contradiction human beings are all imprisoned by the same existentialist fate, and yet are each individual and different. His plays provide solutions not only in their content and themes but more importantly for the purpose of my study, in their very form. Monologic discourses inherited from past centuries subject the individual to institutionalised terrorism by silencing the 'other's' discourses. At the time of Genet's theatre faith in any one single answer, be it religious, political or artistic, is lost. Any system of totalitarianism serves only to isolate those who do not feel included by it. The mobilisation of a plurality of forms of expression in Genet's theatre - rhythms, movements, sounds and colours - assists in overcoming exclusion by providing a multiplicity and variety of discourses, both verbal and non-verbal.

(i) A Contestation of Monolithism: Diffusion

Genet questions all ideological discourses and replaces them with a plurality of diverse and contradicting voices. His use of non-verbal form is inherent in this process, as my dissertation testifies.

Ideological justifications for pernicious beliefs and practices are considered by Genet, amongst others, to be implicit in the dialectics of Aristotle and Plato. Aristotle's mandatory universal theme, salient plot and advancing action all neatly developed in five acts, has had a profound influence on European theatre. In addition, Aristotle is commonly regarded as believing that the linguistic categories into which people and things are sorted, reflect a naturally objective order in reality. When however the *female*

¹ Esslin, Martin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1980). I merely mention Esslin's coinage in order to highlight the preoccupation a definition of human existence in 20th-century French theatre. I do not necessarily subscribe to the theorist's gloss, for the four authors never formally created a school together, and the pessimistic absurdism of their works is debatable.

sex is defined as a 'natural deformation' of the male standard and is characterised by incapacity, Aristotle's aspirations for a dialectical truth clearly become vain, for the philosopher manifestly never reaches beyond common belief. In addition, the Aristotelian quest for universality refuses the expression of singularity by reducing difference to the ontological order of 'the same'¹. Aristotelian and Platonic rhetorics forsake the individual, favouring a cosmological universal that claims to order chaos. Possible 20th-century answers to the dilemma of human identity such as Claudel's religion, the Surrealist unconscious or Sartre's political commitment would equally not be an option for Genet, who feels that one tyrannical ideology will simply be replaced by another.

Whether his biography be myth or reality, fact or fiction, Genet the persona is excluded. He is without a family, he is homosexual, he is a criminal. His difference eliminates him from the Aristotelian category of Man. His characters are equally excluded. The marginality of forgotten felons in their cells or in faraway penal colonies; of maids in attic rooms; of Genet himself in a homophobic society, haunts the author's works. In the words of Albert Dichy, 'Genet est demeuré jusqu'au bout, envers et contre tous - et d'abord contre lui-même - dans ce lieu où la société l'avait, dès sa naissance placé: dehors.'² From his position as an outsider Genet questions the very foundations of social order and its categories of moral judgement. Genet's irreverence towards dominant logic illustrated in his literature, is a testament to his protest against Aristotelian

¹ Aristotle speaks of *endoxa* and *phainomena*, usually translated as 'common beliefs' and 'phenomena'. His dialectics have troubling implications when for example one attempts to include linguistic elements in the category of *endoxa*. Sceptical modern critics are justified in asking how his claims about Greek morphology, syntax and usage can support substantial propositions valid in his era, let alone beyond the Ancient Greek community. In his *Politics* (*Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by J. Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. I, II) for example, Aristotle glosses 'slaves' as 'living instrumental property' and in *De Generatione Animalum* (*Complete Works* vol. 1, p. 20) he strives for a positivist universal truth that ultimately erects a hierarchy in which the exclusion from importance of certain members of society is implicit.

Recent works on Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy have attempted to show that the two philosophers did not advocate a logic that was as inflexible as has been suggested. In his 'Tithenai ta Phainomena' in *Logic, Science and Dialectic, Collected Papers in Greek Philosophy* (ed. by M.C. Nusbaum (London: Duckworth, 1986)) G.E.L. Owen prefers to translate Aristotelian *endoxa* as 'common and reputable beliefs espoused by many or the wise' and *phainomena* as 'appearances which embrace what people are inclined to accept', thus attenuating accusations of dogmatism. Nevertheless, it is still understandable that theorists feel Aristotelian philosophy has imposed a regime of supposed 'truths' upon ensuing centuries.

When in this study I mention 'the Greeks', I refer to a dominant discourse that upholds common beliefs, one the literalism of which excludes the plurality and mobility of diversified viewpoints.

² Albert Dichy, 'Le guerres de Jean Genet', *La Trahison, Cinéma et littérature*, 9, 19 November 1991, Centre de recherche et d'action culturelle.

exclusion, as I elucidate throughout this dissertation. In *Les Nègres* he ridicules the past glories of now irrelevant western pomp and circumstance and derides the white Queen's attempts to cling on to the vestiges of the 'vierges du Parthénon, ange du portail de Reims, colonnes valériennes, Musset, Chopin, Vincent d'Indy, cuisine française, Soldat Inconnue, ordonnance de Le Nôtre, coqueliquots, bleuets, un brin de coquetterie, jardins de curés...'. The White Court knows that it is attending its 'propres funérailles' and that the 'agonie' of dominant western ideologies has begun¹. One overriding western dominant discourse will be replaced with a post-colonial multiplicity of diverse codes, as Genet, in a manner akin to Beckett, topples the power of one myth by borrowing from all myths.

I allude briefly to a work by Luce Irigaray entitled *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* and to Roland Barthes, for they enable me to establish a link between the concepts difference, singularity and the outside on the one hand, and the use of plural, non-verbal form in Genet's works on the other. Drawing together Genet and a 'feminist' author might at first appear desultory. In one respect a certain degree of circumnavigation is perhaps inevitable when entering into uncharted waters such as those in which a definition of Genet's non-verbal at this stage floats. In another respect however, a comparison between Genet and Irigaray is not as arbitrary as it might appear, as it provides compass points with which to plot my journey into Genet's poetics of the non-verbal. Irigaray, along with many post-structuralist authors, is perturbed by the exclusion of the 'other' from the totalising forces and homogeneity of heterosexual dominant discourses. I choose to establish a comparison between Genet and Irigaray as opposed to another writer from the wide range who are concerned with difference and the diversification of literary expression because Irigaray's chapter of *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* entitled 'Les "Mécaniques" des fluides' illustrates most clearly how the quest to include as opposed to exclude can be aligned with the desire to pluralise expressive modes. The broader points of Irigaray's argument enable me to introduce the concept of diversification through non-verbal form into the context of an attempt to represent human singularity. Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes* enables me further to define the term *différence* and to relate it to Genet's use of the non-verbal.

French literature this century seeks to illustrate the non-containment of the human condition within existing forms. Irigaray explains how the lack of a female imaginary within a phallogentric symbolic that is inherited from the Ancient Greeks inevitably

¹ Jean Genet, *Les Nègres* (Décines: L'Arbalète, 1958), p. 55-56, p. 27 and p. 56, respectively.

results in women only partially perceiving, understanding and expressing themselves and their femininity. The origins of language are presumed inseparable from those of humankind. But the nature of existence is non-quantifiable in terms of Greco-Roman codifying systems of the logical and the rational according to Irigaray:

Le rejet, l'exclusion, d'un imaginaire féminin met certes la femme en position de ne s'éprouver que fragmentairement, dans les marges peu structurées d'une idéologie dominante, comme déchets, ou excès, d'un miroir investi par le 'sujet' (masculin) pour s'y refléter, s'y redoubler lui-même.¹

The Aristotelian male symbolic and logic fail to encapsulate the feminine, thus reducing women to a state of subsistence within a marginal existence. Irigaray explains how the male sex organ, readily symbolised by the phallus, and the male orgasm are more 'obvious' than 'l'horreur du rien à voir' (p. 25), the ambiguous mystery of female sexuality. In her comments on the dominant and excluding ideologies intrinsic to our everyday language she writes with respect to women:

Elle ne dira donc pas ce qu'elle désire. D'ailleurs, elle ne le sait pas, ou plus. Comme l'avoue Freud, ce qui concerne les débuts de la vie sexuelle de la petite fille est si 'obscur', si 'blanchi par les ans', qu'il faudrait comme fouiller très profondément la terre pour retrouver derrière les traces de cette civilisation-ci, de cette histoire-ci, les vestiges d'une civilisation plus archaïque qui pourraient donner quelques indices de ce que serait la sexualité de la femme. Cette civilisation très ancienne n'aurait sans doute pas le même langage, le même alphabet... Le désir de la femme ne parlerait pas le même langage que celui de l'homme, et il aurait été recouvert par la logique qui domine l'Occident depuis les Grecs (p. 25).

Simply because Freudian civilisation and history have buried the clues or 'indices' to the nature of female identity, it does not mean that this identity is a fallacy according to Irigaray. For her, 'le langage des hommes' is clearly incapable of expressing 'le désir de la femme'. The sole means by which this Freudian discontent can be overcome according to her is via an exploration beyond the Greco-Roman legacy through the elaboration of a renewed symbolic fund capable of incorporating and conveying the feminine. Irigaray invokes women to search for expression that transcends the reductionism of the phallogocentric economy. She denounces phallogocentrism. She calls for a language outside the forces of dominant ideologies, one that recalls a pre-Aristotelian femininity. She calls for the forging of an alphabet that works towards the expression of singularity instead of a universality that reduces difference to the same. I highlight her endeavours to inscribe

¹ Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 1977), p. 29.

language with new meaning, and point to Genet's use of non-verbal materiality as a possible option for the expression of singularity.

Irigaray feels that the confinement of phallogentric representation ill equips women for self-expression. According to her the physical reality of the feminine resists phallogentric symbolisation. In her chapter of *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* entitled 'Les "Mécaniques" des fluides' she searches for a metaphor capable of conveying the undine nature of femininity she claims to be a quality intrinsic to woman. Antonin Artaud, with whom I compare Genet at length in Chapter Two, comes to similar conclusions regarding the feminine, from his studies of oriental, Ancient Greek and Indian cultures. The feminine betrays the Platonic definition of receptacle. For him the feminine embodies all that is 'volatile mais versatile, il est changeant donc il n'est pas conforme à sa nature, il est traître en somme par rapport à sa nature.'¹ Irigaray searches for a means of expression capable of conveying these ebbs and flows which both she and Artaud consider to be inherent in the female. Her quest is pertinent to my study for it advocates a freedom and diversity of expression that is clearly embodied in Genet's theatre, as this dissertation illustrates. Irigaray finds the feminine metaphor she seeks in the fluidity and mobility of liquids. She makes reference to the physics of liquids in order to explain how in the same manner as liquids, female sexuality diffuses itself in ways that are scarcely quantifiable by or compatible with the framework of 'la logique qui domine l'Occident depuis les Grecs' (p. 25). She advocates a form of language germane to a flowing liquid, that refuses to conform with a recognisable shape: a language with versatility, one without the limitations that render exclusion inevitable. For her, expression equals plurality, perhaps confusion and blurring, but never the undisputed, unquestionable, rational dogmatism symbolised by the single, seemingly unequivocal significations of Aristotle's common beliefs and phenomena:

Or, *la femme a des sexes un peu partout*. Elle jouit d'un peu partout. Sans parler même de l'hystérisation de tout son corps, la géographie de son plaisir est bien plus diversifiée, multiple dans ses différences, complexe, subtile, qu'on ne l'imagine... dans un imaginaire un peu trop centré sur le même.

'Elle' est indéfiniment autre en elle-même. De là vient sans doute qu'on la dit fatasque, incompréhensible, agitée, capricieuse... Sans aller jusqu'à évoquer son langage, où 'elle' part dans tous les sens sans qu' 'il' y repère la cohérence d'aucun sens (p. 28)

¹ Antonin Artaud, *Notes sur les cultures orientales, grecques, indiennes, Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), IV, p. 136.

Like a liquid, the feminine resists the countable according to Irigaray. For her, all that is 'féminin' is 'diversifié'; 'multiple dans ses différences'; 'complexe'; 'subtile', like a liquid. The feminine is unending, diffusable and dilatable, and at the same time viscous and compressible. The form of expression required to embody the feminine must therefore be equally multiple and diverse. But what does this mean in practical terms of representation and expression, and what light does it shed on plurality in Genet's theatre?

Roland Barthes' definition of *différence* in his *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* illustrates how a multiplicity and plurality of expression strengthens the resilience of difference:

La différence est plurielle, sensuelle et textuelle; [...] la différence est l'allure même d'un poudrioement, d'une dispersion, d'un miroitement; il ne s'agit plus de retrouver dans la lecture du monde et du sujet, des oppositions, mais des débordements, des empiétements, des fuites, des glissements, des déplacements, des dérapages.¹

For the purpose of analysing the non-verbal in Genet's theatre Barthes's reference to difference is instructive. Like in the case of Irigaray, Barthes feels that difference can be encapsulated only by plurality and ambivalence, not by vain ideological unequivocalness. This echoes Irigaray's sentiment that the female sex organ is metaphorically '*un peu partout*' and not solely at the site of the sex organs. Barthes's metaphors for difference, notably dispersion and fragmentation, are akin to Irigaray's concept of fluidity. But in *Roland Barthes* the semiotician perhaps goes a step further than Irigaray in that he appears to suggest how difference can be expressed in practical terms. The straitjacket imposed by the dichotomies of common beliefs and phenomena - good and bad; right and wrong - must be untied in order to unleash a multiplicity of mobile viewpoints. In addition, Barthes opens the representational arena to all expressive forms. He hence suggests that rather than relying exclusively on semantic, verbal form, writers can adopt a more plural, 'sensual', semiotic mode of expression that involves all the senses, excludes nothing, and incorporates all forms, whether verbal or non-verbal.

Few artists champion the cause of plurality and create a discursive space for the expression of difference in more committed ways than Genet. Irigaray as a theorist aspires to the expression of all aspects of the human condition. She inherits Genet's belief that unequivocalness is a myth. However, to my mind her nostalgic holy grailism takes several

¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 1975, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), III, pp. 147-8.

steps back, by apparently claiming, like Artaud, that diffusion and ambivalence are innate female qualities. ‘Elle ne dira donc pas ce qu’elle désire. D’ailleurs, elle ne le sait pas, ou plus’, writes Irigaray of women (p. 25). She implies that women were once in touch with a true nature that has now been collectively forgotten or excluded by ideologies inherited from the Greeks. The myths of origin and authenticity that Irigaray evokes with her allusions to vestiges of ancient civilisations are suspect. Regulatory power surely produces the subject it controls. That power is not only imposed externally, but works as the normative means by which subjects are formed. For Genet, Irigaray’s ‘petite fille’ would have no way of delving into her unconscious or her ancestral past in search of a true female identity. No quality is intrinsic in Genet’s human make-up. It appears paradoxical that feminists such as Irigaray reject the regulating force that phallogocentric Ancient Greek philosophy exercises on today’s society and by the same stroke uphold the essentialist ideology of a prelogical matriarch. Subjects are the products of the societies into which they are born. They are not the legacy of a bygone ‘natural’ genealogy. As I maintain throughout this dissertation, Genet liberates the subject from the shackles of inherency even if several decades later Irigaray re-incarcerates this subject through her search for a ‘true’ female identity. Irigaray’s concept of fluids and diffusion is useful in that it reflects the intention to replace seeming certainty with more fluid, impressionistic suggestion. However, Irigaray appears to uphold this concept of diffusion as primordial and immutable. What Genet understands more than many literary figures before or after him is that any prioritisation implicitly reinstates one single dominant ideology. The only stable, lasting paradigm in Genet’s world is instability. Non-verbal forms are introduced onto his stage in an attempt to represent the plural facets of our existence. But they are neither prioritised nor revered above any other theatrical code systems.

(ii) Genet’s Theatre: Plurality through Non-Verbal Form

In his theatre of non-verbal as well as verbal form Genet attempts to overcome exclusion by pluralising his modes of expression. Genet the dramatist calls into play not simply the canonic Aristotelian components of theatre - dialogue, plot and characterisation - but also the vast symphony of dramatic signifiers at his disposal. No discursive form is rejected. For example, the material, acoustic dimension to verbal language, at once verbal and non-verbal, is foregrounded in order to exploit all the forms at the author’s disposal and to

allow a multiplicity of voices to be heard through Genet's plurality of forms. I endeavour to demonstrate how Genet honours advocates of a language of plurality and multiplicity, incorporating difference instead of excluding it. I explain that Genet achieves this inclusion through the elevation of materiality - rhythm, colour, movement - in theatre.

In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* Genet is heartened to find a culture that exists in blissful ignorance of rationalist numerical operations:

Les nègres n'ont pas d'années. M^{lle} Adeline saurait nous apprendre que, s'ils veulent compter, ils s'embrouillent dans leurs calculs, car ils savent bien qu'ils sont nés à l'époque d'une disette, de la mort de trois jaguars, de la floraison des amandiers, et ces circonstances, mêlées aux chiffres, permettent qu'on s'égare.¹

In the same way that black history can be structured around animals or trees as opposed to the Gregorian calendar, so Genet's theatre is constructed around a multiplicity of different codified systems. The Blacks in *Les Nègres* attempt to express and not exclude difference by insisting that their future will be built not solely on one system, but on many. They will 'obstiner dans la déraison, dans le refus', as they counter the monolithism of one overriding rationalist discourse (p. 41).

In Indian art grandeur is illustrated not by amplifying but by multiplying. Instead of representing power by means of gigantic proportions, an elephant is given many trunks, or a god several arms and legs. Genet opts for greatness through multiplication instead of monolithic magnification. Taleb alludes in the first version of *Les Paravents* to the extreme unhappiness Saïd has brought upon him. He describes his wretchedness as 'le malheur à deux têtes, à quatre mains et à vingt doigts.'² Genet diffuses the attention usually enjoyed by plot, action and characterisation alone, so that the spectator's senses are attracted to a veritable circus of signifying scenic forms.

Genet, himself detached from the heterosexual discourse of homogeneity, neither silences nor masks difference. And yet he does not fully reject dominant discursive forms. Instead, through various processes of reconfiguration, he imposes his difference on the signs and symbols of dominant discourse. Stripping away the lies, deceptions, impostures and falseness of the respectable world, Genet concludes that these are nevertheless inescapable features of social existence. Genet's drama testifies clearly to a rejection of the conventional Aristotelian tenets of theatre - the verbal text, plot and characterisation.

¹ Jean Genet, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 173.

² Jean Genet, *Les Paravents* (Décines: Marc Barbezat, 1961), fifth tableau, pp. 44-50.

However, this disregard for what Irigaray several decades later would term phallogentric discourse is in no way an attempt to transcend society's inheritance altogether. Genet does not seek to forge a renewed language that paradoxically revives an ancient truth in the vein of Irigaray. He suffers from no delusions about 'true' existence and 'true' expression. He overcomes the violence of metaphysical reduction through the imitation, if subversive imitation, of the forms of expression provided by the very society that excludes him. 'Le théâtre [...] apporte la possibilité de dire ce qui n'est pas conforme au code culturel ou à la logique sociale', writes Anne Ubersfeld in *Lire le théâtre*¹. Genet's choice to become a playwright in the latter part of his career as a fictional writer is no coincidence. 'Si nous opposons la vie à la scène', he writes in his *Lettres* to his director Roger Blin, 'c'est que nous pressentons que la scène est un lieu voisin de la mort, où toutes les libertés sont possibles' (p. 12). The host of forms on a theatrical stage and the potential to inscribe these forms with whatever meaning Genet desires, affords the playwright the freedom of expression that enables him to embody his own and the spectator's singularity. Not only semantics and thematics, but also the materiality of signs - rhythm, intonation, music, dance, costume, make-up, hairstyles, colour, gesture, lighting and set effects, in brief the whole wealth of sign systems afforded by the theatre - are exploited by Genet. Plurality is by definition non-discriminatory, and rises above the conformity of accepted cultural codes, as Ubersfeld implies. In Genet's theatre any form can signify; all are equally charged with semantic and semiotic value.

Genet's stage displays the symbols of dominant culture but the difference is that it displays *all* of them, with subversive disregard for the exclusion of difference that can arise when signs are ordered according to hierarchy. Genet crams his stage full of his society's signs, giving them a multiplicity of significances on different incompatible levels, in turn underscoring the art and artifice of our existence. No one sign system is subordinated to another for any sustained period. Genet's infamous definition of poetry - the art of exercising alchemy on excrement - illustrates graphically the absence of any kind of canon, or any adherence to hierarchy in his theatrical sign repository². Anne Ubersfeld highlights the manner in which theatrical elements in Genet's dramaturgy are

¹ Anne Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre* (Paris: Sociales, 1977), p. 50.

² In *Pompes funèbres* Genet speaks of 'la poésie ou l'art d'utiliser les restes. D'utiliser la merde et de vous la faire bouffer' (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 190.

given supreme and yet equal status. She stresses that even the stage directions are ‘d'une importance, d'une beauté, d'une signifiante extrêmes’ (p. 21). There is now no reason why rhythm, movement, intonation and set should not be of as much worth as Aristotelian dialogue, plot and characterisation.

It is not only the existence of multifarious forms in theatre that renders this medium favourable to the inclusion and expression of difference. The very nature of theatrical performance which, however scripted and rehearsed is nevertheless inevitably susceptible to spontaneity and improvisation, is characterised by fluidity and mobility. Maria Casarès, who played one of the lead roles, La Mère in Blin's production of *Les Paravents*, writes of the theatrical experience: ‘Rien n'est su d'avance, rien n'est *appris*, tout reste à découvrir, à nommer’¹. The constant diversification and sophistication of performance technique prevents the theatrical form from becoming definitively fixed². In Genet's theatre in particular renewal and rejuvenation are prevalent due to the perpetual revisions and re-revisions of the author's works. He writes to his publisher Marc Barbezat: ‘*Le Balcon* est corrigé. Ne portez la mention “édition définitive” car j'y retravaillerai sans doute jusqu'à ma mort.’³

Irigaray's metaphor of liquid is conceptually evocative and optimistic, but she suggests few means with which to convert it into practical literary expression production. Genet's stage provides the multiplicity of different means of expression that Barthes hints at. Anything placed on stage or in the theatrical text becomes a sign. Genet exploits the plurality of form implicit in theatre to dislodge the foundations of hierarchy and exclusionist universality. He simultaneously upholds doxa and exposes the fault lines in Aristotelian monolithism. The result is a poetry of plurality which works against the creation of proper sense. The sequential linearity, single dimension and necessarily articulatory nature of verbal language and progressional plot can contrive to alienate the speaking individual's difference. When verbal dialogue, plot and characterisation are placed on an equal footing with all other scenic elements including make-up or acoustics,

¹ Casarès's italics, Maria Casarès, ‘Extrait d'un article paru dans la Revue *Masques* no. 12, hiver 1981/2’, in *La Bataille des Paravents*, ed. by Lynda Bellity Peskine and Albert Dichy, with previously unpublished texts and documents by André Acquart, Roger Blin and Jean Genet (Paris: Théâtre de l'odéon, 1966), p. 50.

² Roger Blin speaks of the mobility and spontaneity of Genet's theatre in his interview with Bettina Knapp, ‘An Interview with Roger Blin’, *Tulane Drama Review*, 7 (1962-63), pp. 111-126.

³ Jean Genet, letter dated October 1959, *Lettres à Olga et Marc Barbezat* (Décines, Marc Barbezat L'Arbalète, 1988), p. 197.

difference that is inexpressible off stage might be rendered expressible by at least some of the vast repertory of symbols offered by Genet's plays. Genet's theatre, this most open of communication systems, not only provides the author and the characters' difference with a space to inhabit, but also the spectator's. Theatre is a veritable 'expression-stimulation' in Ubersfeld's words where, far more so perhaps than film, the spectator's eye is free to select which area of the stage or text to concentrate on, and when (p. 41). Whereas the filmmaker or even of the author-narrator may tend towards a monolithic viewpoint, the playwright has little control over the spectator's attention, and the performance is fissured by the multitude of panoramic, auto-focussing eyes in the audience. Genet selects an already pluralistic artistic medium and misses no opportunity to exploit the potential for dispersed, diffuse expression to the full. The marginal voices of difference might be able finally to resonate.

(iii) Conclusion

This century one single answer to the human dilemma no longer suffices. A plural, fragmented and at the same time panoramic mode of literary expression is therefore required in order to bear witness to the refraction of ideas, beliefs and images that has taken place. Genet's journey into the realms of plurality corresponds in form to the calls by feminists such as Irigaray for a language of inclusion. For Irigaray theorisation rejects and excludes whatever is beyond its jurisdiction. This 'beyond' to which she alludes does not exist in Genet's cosmogony of artifice. For Irigaray women must search in the 'obscure' depths and plot their 'different' identity across the geography of the body to rediscover the fragments of themselves that remain unexpressed by conformist language (p. 25). For Genet nothing exists beyond the bounds of discursivity. Difference and singularity are expressed through formal representation and not in spite of it. If Irigaray's is a messianic hope for a language above and beyond representation, the monolithism of transcendental truth will surely seize power again. This form of plurality risks a paradoxical reinstatement of Aristotelian doxa. Genet's approach to plurality as opposed perhaps to Irigaray's, manages successfully to avoid this potential danger.

In my next chapter I dissociate Genet's use of a plurality of both verbal and material forms in theatre from any attempt to transcend discursivity. Genet's involvement in a theatre of physical forms is often misconstrued as being Artaudian. It therefore requires redefining. The non-verbal is nothing more than another layer of codified form that Genet adds to his world of illusion.

Chapter Two

Materiality: Substance or Surface?

Genet's theatre is a celebration of both verbal and non-verbal material form. The structuring of movement, gesture, colour and word raises form to a status equal or superior to content. Acoustic and visual materiality in communication are sometimes perceived as having universal appeal. They are thought to be an undistorted, more direct form of expression. So is the tyranny of monologic discourse replaced by the essentialism of a mode of communication that expresses one indisputable truth? According to numerous critics, Genet's use of the non-verbal in theatre is employed to these transcendental ends. For Claude Bonnefoy for example, Genet's theatrical works are played out 'selon un rythme respiratoire exprimant immédiatement [la] relation au monde'¹. Before conducting a detailed study of Genet's use of the non-verbal as a means of theatrical communication in Part Two of this dissertation, it is essential to counter this widely held misconception of the non-verbal in theatre, and to redefine Genet's use of acoustic and visual materiality in terms of a layered texture of signs and codes which promises none of the transcendence that some critics unjustifiably proclaim. Rhythm, colour and gesture present a more pluralistic potential for expression, as my last chapter indicates. They are however no more immediate nor less codified than verbal language. Through theatrical gesture and sound the actor and spectator do not commune with any essence of meaning that might lie beyond discursive form. On the contrary, meaning exists solely in terms of form.

I cannot discuss performance, set and rhythm, without acknowledging the indisputably crucial role played by the pivotal legacy of Antonin Artaud. Genet's theatre is frequently described as Artaudian. I employ Artaudian theory as a key with which to unlock the problems, dilemmas and mysteries inherent in a study of the non-verbal in Genet's theatre. I explore the advantages and clear limitations of such a comparison. I stress in the strongest possible terms that unlike the theories of Artaud and his disciples - Peter Brook and The Living Theater - Genet's notions of the material display no

¹ Claude Bonnefoy, *Genet* (Paris: Editions universitaires, 1965), p. 97.

pretensions of transcendence. On the contrary, Genet's material forms resist any essence of meaning, in one respect leaving the individual to spin off without any central core of signification, and in another freeing the subject from the positivism implicit in essentialism. Materiality in Genet's theatre is form itself, not an Artaudian negation of form.

For Genet, costume, rhythm and gesture are layers of discursive form, of everyday ritual. In this chapter I explain how Genet incorporates non-verbal signifiers into his theatre for they best represent his concept of the world as a *féerie*, a universe of illusion. I seek to attain a definition *en progrès* of Genet's poetics of representation and to situate the non-verbal within this definition. This poses the unique problem of attempting to define terms employed by an author who thinks profoundly not just about meaning, but about meaning production. Genet's works are a testament to constant reincarnation. He avoids concrete definitions because he refuses essentialist meaning. In this chapter I nonetheless attempt to define the specificity of the non-verbal forms Genet employs in his theatre.

I. An Axis: Transcendence or Sedimentation?

My last chapter contextualised Genet's theatre within the post-war search for a definition of the social human. Genet's use of non-verbal theatrical expression constitutes part of his endeavour to overcome his, his characters' and his spectator's exclusion. As I have mentioned, the use of the non-verbal tends to identify itself with a quest to transcend social discourse and to attain a kind of permanence. My reading of material form in Genet's theatre critically counters this concept. In his *Les Mots et les choses* Michel Foucault provides an axis that I employ throughout this chapter in order to illustrate how Artaud and Genet are diametrically opposed in their conceptions of the non-verbal. Foucault alludes to the 20th-century preoccupation with the subject, with the 'self'. Is this subject to be found in its original state by sifting through the petrified sediments deposited by society and history? Or else is the individual actually a product of these sediments?:

à travers le domaine de l'originaire qui articule l'expérience humaine sur le temps de la nature et de la vie, sur l'histoire, sur le passé sédimenté des cultures, la pensée moderne s'efforce de retrouver l'homme et son identité - en cette plénitude

ou en ce rien qu'il est lui-même - l'histoire et le temps en cette répétition qu'ils rendent impossible mais qu'ils forcent à penser, et l'être même en cela même qu'il est.¹

Foucault highlights the eventual two-way motion of the quest for a definition of the subject: are we to move towards a transcendental subject characterised by a fullness, a 'plénitude', or must we accept ourselves as the products of historical representations and social discourses, without which we are 'rien'? These opposing directions form the axis along which I investigate Genet's definition of identity and his use of theatrical material form in representing this definition.

Antonin Artaud, perhaps more than any other dramatist this century, has championed the use of materiality - rhythm, gesture and sound - on stage. An analysis of Genet's relationship with the works of Artaud is somewhat problematic for several reasons, not least because Genet according to Dichy and Fouché's *Chronologie* is said not to have come into contact with Artaud's works until the 1960's, when Genet had already completed the first draft of his dramatic oeuvre². It is nevertheless productive and moreover vital to compare the writings of the two dramaturgists, since Genet's admiration for Artaudian theory is clear. In addition, even if Genet's style does not find its origins consciously in Artaud's dramaturgy, his theatre is patently evocative of certain tenets of Artaudian dramatic theory. By highlighting the aspects of theatre that Genet shares with Artaud, I earn a most useful vantage point from which to examine the non-verbal in the former's theatre. Both artists pursue the quest for an alchemical transformation of material theatrical forms - the actor's gestures, rhythms and voice - into poetry, as Genet expresses in *Le Funambule* with his wish to effect a 'métamorphose de la poussière en poudre d'or'³. In a century marked by an existential crisis of the self, both dramatists endeavour to place a more quintessential definition of human identity on stage. Both seek to portray the human via a theatre of poetic - notably acoustic and visual - materiality. Both Artaud and Genet perceive the uniqueness of theatrical poetry to be preferable to the deceptive ease with which an audience accepts the prosaic naturalist or psychological definitions of the self. Both are hierophants of the

¹ Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 345.

² Dichy, Albert and Fouché, P., *Jean Genet. Essai de chronologie 1910-1944* (Paris: Bibliothèque de littérature française contemporaine de Paris VII, 1988).

³ Jean Genet, *Le Funambule* (Décines: Marc Barbezat, L'Arbalète, 1958), p. 17.

physical approach to theatre, placing a more physical subject on stage and emphasising the actor's vocal rhythms and gestures. However, as I have stressed, it is only from a wholly superficial perspective that their works coincide, contrary to what a host of critics that I quote throughout this chapter might claim. Any parallels drawn must be taken purely at the level of the dramatists' practical, material approaches to production and performance, for the conceptual differences are at times radical. Genet and Artaud employ similar means to arrive at diametrically opposed ends of the schema set out by Foucault. Many of Artaud's works, of which I study in some detail *Le Théâtre et son double*; 'Le Théâtre d'après-guerre à Paris'; 'Manifeste pour un théâtre avorté'; 'Sur le théâtre balinais'; 'Le Théâtre de Séraphin' and 'Théâtre Sacré', would lead a critic to deduce that Artaud considers theatrical materiality to be tapped from the cosmic energies of the universe and channelled through the body's organs. Whilst Artaud at times recognises the unstable semiotic value of theatrical signs, certain sections of his theories lead one to conclude that he believes in the truth, unity, eternity and 'plénitude' in Foucault's words, of the integral subject. The interpretations made by generations of ensuing Artaudians, notably - Peter Brook and The Living Theater - bear witness to this interpretation of Artaud's dramatic theory. They appear to confuse the use of the non-verbal in theatre with ill-defined and suspect mysticism. For Genet, there is no immutable truth or essence of meaning inherent in the non-verbal. Material form is another layer of artifice that runs no deeper than the surface of discursive terrain mapped out by social and cultural doxa and beneath which lies only Foucault's 'rien'.

II Genet and Artaud: Subverting the Theatrical Canon.

(i) Genet as Artaud's disciple?

Artaud is as much a product as a barometer of his time. His extensive and diverse analysis of theatre spans diachronically from Ancient Greece, to productions contemporary to him such as those by the Théâtre Alfred Jarry. It stretches globally from Mexico, Japan and Bali, to Europe¹. During the peak of his writing career in the 1930's,

¹ The Théâtre Alfred Jarry was founded by Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron in the early 1920's. It reacted against the naturalist theatrical tradition begun by André Antoine, and against the frivolous Théâtre de boulevard. It preferred to espouse the works of more avant-garde dramatists such as Alfred Jarry, and to develop Oriental acting techniques seen in Japanese Noh, and Balinese theatre.

Artaud produced a prolific number of letters and manifestos, notably *Le Théâtre de la cruauté* in 1932 and his seminal collection *Le Théâtre et son double* in 1938. His writings possess the quality of a frenzied dream, where flashes of inspiration seem to near a bewildering and hypnotic mysticism. He is indebted to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu* plays, for his writings are characterised by their vicious satirical critique of bourgeois taste and habits, and to Guillaume Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, for the theorist's writings often reveal hermetic symbolism, abrupt transformations and the quality of disjointed dreams. But Artaud's works are often extreme, feverish intoxication and poetic ecstasy sometimes bordering madness.

Genet is quoted frequently as being an Artaudian. According to Guicharnaud in *Modern French Theatre*, Artaud's legacy is discernible in the works of such 20th-century literary figures as Ghelderode, Camus, Audiberti, Pichette, Vauthier, Ionesco, Beckett, Weingarten, Adamov and... Genet. But 'what would Artaud have thought of *them*?', asks the author of *The Theatre of Revolt*, Robert Brustein¹. In his opinion, Artaud would have found Ionesco's attack on the bourgeoisie formulaic, as Ionesco replaces conservative form with equally repressive structures. Beckett may have been seen as too nihilistic and wan for Artaud's vital, delirious theatre. It is Genet's 'alchemical, primitive, messianic' theatre that Brustein champions as the true realisation of the Artaudian 'Theatre of Cruelty'. Brustein heralds Genet as the deserved guardian of Artaud's legacy: 'in this movement [the 'Theatre of Cruelty'] Artaud plays the role of a prophetic Aristotle, writing the *Poetics* of an imaginary theatre which Jean Genet, his posthumous Sophocles, will not begin to execute until after his death' (p.364). Brustein's alignment of Genet with Artaud is accurate at a certain level, that I outline presently. However, at any other level his comparison is not only misguided, but also unhelpful in any attempt to define the non-verbal in Genet's theatre.

(ii) Genet's 'Artaudian' Theatre

(a) Questioning Plot and Characterisation

Genet rejects the pre-eminence in theatre of plot, characterisation and the verbal text. In this respect his theatre is Artaudian. Artaud recentres the linear genealogy of diegetic

¹ Brustein's italics, Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt, Studies in Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekov, Shaw, Brecht, Pirandello, O'Neill and Genet* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1964).

narrative and the psychological dimensions of characterisation around *mise en scène* and spectacle. These aspects of his theatrical concept provide a vantage point from which to view the way in which Genet combines text, plot and characterisation with non-verbal scenic elements.

Anecdote and characterisation, western conceptions of theatre, superfluous 'attirail' inherited from the Greeks and the *Précieuses*, must be removed or reduced 'à son minimum impossible', according to Artaud¹. Human identity on stage must be defined in poetic as opposed to prosaic terms. Poetry abandoned the sinking ship of banal naturalist drama - the 'théâtre d'idiot, de fou, d'inverti, de grammairien, d'épicier, d'anti-poète et de positiviste, c'est-à-dire d'occidental'² - but Artaud invites it back into his new fleet:

Ce n'est pas pour rien, on peut le voir, que la poésie s'est retirée du théâtre. Ce n'est pas par un simple hasard des circonstances si, depuis fort longtemps, tout poète dramatique a cessé de se manifester. Le langage de la parole a ses lois. On s'est trop habitué depuis quatre cents ans et plus, surtout en France, à n'employer les mots au théâtre que dans un sens de définition.³

Artaud's Surrealist heritage is apparent in his desire to make poetic and not literal use of the signs offered by society. Since the Classics, the subject on the stages of western Europe has been defined in terms of plot and characterisation, both of which according to Artaud fail to transcend epiphenomena and reach a universal, essential meaning. For him, only a poetry of movement and sound is capable of conveying some kind of truth about our existence.

Artaud expresses his admiration for Balinese theatre where, instead of having a narrative spun for them, the spectators must follow the interwoven threads of connections between gesture, colour and movement:

les subdivisions intellectuelles d'un thème sont réduites à rien et [...] *cet espace d'air intellectuel, ce jeu psychique qui existe ordinairement entre les membres d'une phrase, ici est tracé dans l'air scénique entre les membres, l'air et les perspectives d'un certain nombre de cris, de couleurs et de mouvements.*⁴

¹ Antonin Artaud, 'Théâtre Alfred Jarry. Première année - saison 1926-7', *Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), II, p. 18.

² Antonin Artaud, 'La Mise en scène et la métaphysique', in *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 61.

³ Antonin Artaud, 'Lettres sur le langage', in *Le Théâtre et son double*, p. 183.

⁴ Artaud's italics, Antonin Artaud, 'Sur le théâtre balinaise', *Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), IV, p. 298,

In direct opposition to the 'théâtre psychologique [et] grossier' of an Antoine or a Lugné-Poe, the spectator's attention is drawn away from the habitual theatrical canon of verbal language, plot and characterisation, and towards the material signifier¹. Artaud appears to establish an opposition between intellect and the senses, as if they were two separate systems, the latter more immediate and expressive than the former. The reception of the theatrical spectacle through materiality is unmediated and thus universal according to Artaud because, as he explains in 'Le Théâtre de la cruauté' materiality transcends the temporality of anecdote and character and becomes paroxysm, leading to unequivocal understanding².

A similar denigration of linear plot and characterisation in favour of more physical and universal expression is apparent in Genet's theatre. In an article written after having seen the Guaranis, a group of South American Indians who performed at a song and dance festival in Vernou in 1972, Genet speaks in tones that at first appear to bear striking similitudes to Artaud's. He expresses his admiration for the Guaranis' 'exigences de la poésie.'³ According to him their poetics manifest universal interest as opposed to the narrow appeal of Western art's anecdote and theme: 'Notre émotion a alors quelque chose d'étriqué... La chanson - ou la danse - ou le drame - s'adressent à un moment particulier de notre histoire personnelle' (p. 119). He goes on to explain that the subject matter of art must be atemporal and detached from socio-historical points of reference, so as to become a forum for universal accessibility. In his 'Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*' Genet expresses a desire for his own theatre to be more timeless than the representation provided by kitchen-sink platitude: '*Sans pouvoir dire au juste ce qu'est le théâtre, je sais ce que je lui refuse d'être: la description de gestes quotidiens vus de l'extérieur.*'⁴ And in his letter to Jean-Jacques Pauvert on the advent of the production of *Les Bonnes* he reiterates the request that any portrayal of the characters in a naturalist light be replaced by the universality and quintessence of poetic signs: 'Je souhaitais

¹ 'Sur le théâtre balinais', p. 304. André Antoine was founder of the Théâtre-Libre and then of the Théâtre Antoine. He was the father of the French Naturalist movement that began in 1887 and staged plays by Zola, Becque, Goncourt, Ibsen and Hauptmann, and created adaptations of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky's works. Lugné-Poe, also a Naturalist director, staged Ibsen in France.

² See Antonin Artaud, 'Le Théâtre de la cruauté', *Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), IV, p. 319.

³ Jean Genet, 'Faites connaissances avec les Guaranis', *Le Démocrate*, 2 June 1972, in *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. by and rev. by Albert Dichy (Paris: N.R.F. Gallimard, 1991), p. 119.

⁴ Genet's italics, Jean Genet, 'Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*', in *Les Bonnes* (Décines: Marc Barbezat - L'Arbalète, 1976), pp. 9- 10.

ainsi l'abolition des personnages - qui ne tiennent d'habitude que par convention psychologique.'¹ A comparison of the various versions of each play reveals that from one edition to the next plot and psychological characterisation are dwindled to a minimum². Through Genet's successive revisions, the action becomes more implicit as it is passed into gesture and poetic connotation. Even though the last version of *Les Bonnes* is altogether more suggestive and less literal than its former versions, Genet nonetheless feels his final version ought to distance itself even further from the banalities of naturalism:

Il est possible que la pièce paraisse réduite à un squelette de pièce. En effet, tout y est trop vite dit, et trop explicite, je suggère donc que les metteurs en scène éventuels remplacent les expressions trop précises, celles qui rendent la situation trop explicite, par d'autres plus ambiguës³.

Genet, reminiscent of Artaud, dismisses the quotidian transience of descriptive story and character on stage and favours a more quintessential form of expression that is conveyed through sound and gesture.

A naturalist depiction of our life, the Aristotelian preoccupation with plot, and the 'Précieuses''s love of characterisation are pre-eminent in the theatres of neither Artaud nor Genet. There remains one more conservatism that both Genet and Artaud reject in their respective attempts to liberate expression and enable formal plurality to invade the stage.

(b) Questioning the Verbal Text

In the case of the verbal text, again Artaud's theoretical stance provides an insight into Genet's use of non-verbal materiality.

Artaud's reasons for liberating performance from the verbal theatrical text are radical. Language is a cemetery of defunct, lifeless symbols for him. Dominant

¹ Jean Genet, 'Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert', in *Les Bonnes: Pièce en un acte*, both versions, preceded by letter by the author (Décines: Arbalète - Marc Barbezat, 1958), p. 13.

² In the revised version of *Haute surveillance* published in 1988, the three characters' psychological dimensions and the element of anecdote, both of which are salient in the original 1949 version, appear to be consciously reduced. Wordy wranglings between characters and petty jealousies surrounding Yeux-Verts's wife, are trimmed. A similar trend is apparent in *Les Bonnes*, where the two maids evoke a more obvious and naturalist empathy in the spectator in the 1958 version, compared with that of 1976, where any psychological dimension is whittled down so audience empathy is less immediate. Genet removes details, for example banalities that feature in earlier versions, like Madame discussing her hair. Genet leaves what he describes as a 'skeleton' of a play.

³ Footnote, 1976, p. 65.

ideologies are both repressive and irrelevant. This autocratic command is embodied specifically in verbal language, a ritual the meaning of which has faded. Words are shells that play host to infectious germs and carry the diseases of civilisation. 'Les mots ont perdu jusqu'à leur substance et en réalité il faut dire que plus rien ne signifie rien', he writes¹. For Artaud words are concepts, theories, definitions and formulations, that reduce the unknown deceptively to the supposed known, to codes of power and ideology. Linguistic codification cannot possibly contain the fullness of being, or 'substance', as he describes it. I adopt this word to allude to notions of permanence, authenticity, inherency. In addition, Artaud feels that we will only express the fullness of our existence once freed from the constraints of the verbal text: 'Comment arriver à concilier notre désir de liberté et d'indépendance', he writes, 'avec la nécessité de nous conformer à un certain nombre de directives imposées par les textes?'². A dialectic of exclusion is at play. Linking back to my previous chapter, it is clear that in this respect Genet and Artaud resemble each other³. As in the case of plot and characterisation, Genet's reduction of the verbal theatrical text becomes apparent when comparing the different versions of each play⁴. His verbal language however is never dwindled to Artaudian negligibility. The part played by verbal poetry in Genet's theatre is crucial. At no stage is his attention to the non-verbal a complete denial of the verbal. Poetry of the word co-

¹ Antonin Artaud, 'Le Théâtre de Séraphin', *Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), IV, p. 281.

² 'Théâtre Alfred Jarry', p. 17.

³ It would be spurious to conclude that Artaud advocates the total elimination of verbal language in theatre. He aspires towards a modification of the role of dramatic language. Syntagmatic logocentrism must be superseded by the more multi-dimensional rhythmic patterns of the voice and body, as he writes in 'Le Théâtre de la Cruauté':

au lieu d'en revenir à des textes considérés comme définitifs et comme sacrés, il importe avant tout de rompre l'assujettissement du théâtre au texte, et de retrouver la notion d'une sorte de langage unique à mi-chemin entre le geste et la pensée (p. 137).

The stage is released from the stifling grip of the verbal text and invaded with a multitude of forms and colours which enable a true, direct expression of thoughts and desires.

⁴ The 1947 and 1958 versions of *Les Bonnes* are more verbose than their 1976 counterpart (the 1958 version was actually written before the 1947 version. For this reason, it differs more radically from the 1976 edition than the 1947 version does). The following example is one amongst many. In the 1954 edition Claire says to her sister during the roleplay: 'Claire, c'est lourd, affreusement pénible d'être une maîtresse, de contenir toutes les ressources de la haine, d'être le fumier où tu surgiras' (*Les Bonnes*, jouée au Théâtre de la Huchette en 1954 (Décines: L'Arbalète Marc Barbezat, 1958), p. 29.) In the 1976 version however Claire simply says: 'il est pénible d'être Madame, Claire, d'être le prétexte à vos simagrées!' (p. 27.) Genet's desire to taper the verbal text is evident. A comparison of the 1961 and 1976 versions of *Les Paravents* also illustrates Genet's reduction of the verbal text. For example, squabbles between Leïla and

exists with poetry of gesture, mime, rhythm and dance. Whereas Artaud's attitude towards linguistic codification is one of scepticism, Genet upholds and celebrates the verbal, as his famous adage testifies: 'ma victoire est verbale et je la dois à la somptuosité des termes.'¹ In his article 'Genet ou le combat avec le théâtre', Bernard Dort highlights the use of verbal semantics in Genet's theatre: 'Bien qu'il fasse une large part au spectacle, nulle part il ne tente de ramener la parole à son origine, *au bord* du moment où le mot n'est pas encore le discours.'² Genet never underestimates the semantic potential of his theatrical texts. He adds modes of expression to his theatre instead of removing them.

At the same time of course, in ways reminiscent of Artaud, Genet is aware that spectacle, performance and production, and not solely verbal theatrical text are pivotal. The text is pretext, not purpose. In his letters to Roger Blin Genet states that the written text is not an end in itself. Genet's textual dialogues constitute no more than outlines of characters and scenes, that require the colour and shape of theatrical production³. Genet humbly admits that without the genius of Blin, his two most successful plays *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents* would never have enjoyed their overwhelming triumphs. Genet begins the revised edition of *Les Nègres* with a tribute to his director: '*Imiter Blin? Sa réussite était de l'ordre de la perfection [...] Sa mise en scène ne peut être qu'un exemple d'audace et de rigueur*' (p. 9)⁴. Genet mentions Blin's 'bravery', indicating the enormous scope for visual and acoustic creativity which Genet affords, and at which Blin does not balk. Genet welcomes the Artaudian soliciting of visual and acoustic gesture, movement, pattern and rhythm, to lift the play from page to stage, and yet never negates the initial import of the theatrical text.

The classical doxa of plot, characterisation and the verbal text, that dominated the stage for four centuries, are now forced either to retreat to the wings, or else to share the limelight with a multiplicity of other theatrical media. Both Artaud and Genet open up their stages to a carnival of colour, sound, rhythm and movement.

La Mère over Saïd in the Ninth Tableau are removed, as are lengthy chatterings between the Arab wives in the Fifteenth Tableau.

¹ Jean Genet, *Journal du voleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 65.

² Dort's italics, Bernard Dort, 'Genet ou le combat avec le théâtre', in the programme for *Le Balcon*, Théâtre de l'Europe Odéon, directed by Lluís Pasqual, 12 April to 2 June 1991.

³ Genet's italics, *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 64.

⁴ Genet's italics.

(c) Genet and Artaud: Theatre of Visual and Acoustic Poetry

Genet's theatre stands as proof that when performance is not answerable exclusively to plot or superficially convincing characterisation, theatrical production is able to become a colourful patchwork of pattern, movement and rhythm. Visual and acoustic poetics of performance and production, a poetry of space and of the senses through music, dance, colour, sculptural gesture, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonation, architecture, scenery and lighting are the trademarks of both Genet and Artaud. In his piece entitled *Le Théâtre d'après-guerre à Paris*, Artaud illustrates the wide variety of theatrical devices at the disposal of the dramaturgist who sees beyond the confines of the text: 'si au théâtre le texte n'est pas tout, si la lumière est également un langage, cela veut dire que le théâtre garde la notion d'un autre langage qui utilise le texte, la lumière, le geste, le mouvement, le bruit' (p. 209). Genet adheres to Artaudian doctrine in so far as he invests heavily in the visual and acoustic elements of theatre. In his 'Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert' he advocates a theatre where nothing is explicitly said, but where everything is hinted at, through both verbal metaphor and non-verbal semiotics. He writes: 'on ne peut que rêver d'un art qui serait un enchevêtrement profond de symboles actifs, capables de parler au public un langage où rien ne serait dit mais tout pressenti' (p. 11). The spectators must mark their own paths through the visual and acoustic landscape. Both authors are aware of the dramatic efficacy of a theatre that appeals to the audience's visual and aural senses. Artaud speaks of 'prolonger au paroxysme l'efficacité' of the multitude of signs that fill the stage¹. In his *Lettres à Roger Blin* Genet advocates a theatre capable of appealing to the senses of the spectator. He criticises the single dimension of some theatre, writing 'il me semble que le public ne sache pas entendre. Il confond deux mots : on entend avec ses deux oreilles, mais on entend - on l'on tend l'oreille - avec ses doigts de pied' (p. 48). The spectacle must be a physical, as much as an cerebral experience. I demonstrate this in Part Two of the dissertation.

Both Artaud and Genet invest in non-verbal, material form. Their reasons coincide in that they both refuse to comply with the dictate of dominant theatrical discourses, finding them unhelpful in their endeavours to discuss human identity and to

¹ 'Le Théâtre de la cruauté', p. 319.

represent it in theatre, as I discussed in Chapter One. This is where the similarities between the two artists must end. For Artaud, the shift away from text, plot and characterisation, and the introduction of non-verbal form on stage, take place in the name of radical iconoclasm and frankly suspect transcendence. For Genet this shift opens the dramatic arena to material forms with which he can underscore further what is *false* in our existence, not aspire towards an immutable *truth*.

(iii) Genet and Artaud: Differences

I do not wish to surround Artaud's dramaturgy in opprobrium, for his contributions towards the use of the physical in theatre this century have been immeasurable. Nonetheless, contrary to many critics' opinions I contest in the strongest terms the definition of the non-verbal in Genet's theatre in terms of an extra-discursive essence of prelogical truth. I dissociate Genet's visual and acoustic forms from any attempts to transcend form. I firstly indicate differences in Artaud and Genet's motivations for reducing plot, characterisation and verbal text in their respective theatres. I go on to highlight the radical differences between the two, indicating the manner in which, by apparently attempting embody 'truths', Artaud's works runs the risk of being identified with cultish mysticism even if this was never the author's intention. I do not claim that didacticism is inherent in Artaud, but I stress that certain terms he employs encourage his followers to replace the flexible ambiguity of non-verbal semiotics with a dogmatic insistence that a kind of truth has been discovered. They could therefore be guilty of exercising the very tyranny of dominant ideologies they seek to overthrow.

Both Artaud and Genet resist the dictate of established dominant ideologies and fill the stage and auditorium with a plurality of visual and acoustic materiality in a revolt against Greco-Roman dominant and dominating monolithism. But whereas Artaud seeks to purge and cleanse the theatre of ills, Genet wishes to accumulate as many different forms on his stage as possible, in the construction of his theatre of artifice. The aim of Artaud's theatre is 'de troubler, de dissocier la sensibilité, et surtout de l'isoler de l'esprit et de son régime.'¹ Artaud preaches the Nietzschean restoration of a passionate and convulsive sense of life to a world where feelings and desires are replaced by the 'régimes' of dominant forms, for him typified by verbal language. *Le Théâtre et son*

¹ 'Le Théâtre de la cruauté', p. 319.

double is dominated by Artaud's metaphor of the plague, the beauty of which is its destruction of all existing 'régimes', or repressive social forms¹. The plague is the panacea that cures all social ills. Through the plague the social being, a blurred amassing of the reflections of social constraints, is replaced by the total being according to Artaud. Artaud is a romantic who tolerates no boundaries, a prophet of rebellion, a preacher of the total transformation of existing structures. Genet does not show the zealous fervour of his iconoclastic predecessor. Whereas for Artaud the plague purges through the abolition of what he considers ritualised, vapid forms in which dominant ideologies lead their parasitic existences, for Genet exclusion is overcome by replacing monolithic expression with plurality. The habitual tenets of theatre - plot, characterisation and verbal text - are minimised in order to create space for the multitude of other semiotic systems that inhabit his stage. But the canonical tenets are not abolished altogether. In the name of plurality Genet multiplies verbal, acoustic, rhythmic and visual forms instead of subtracting them. A comparison of the first and second versions of *Le Balcon* reveals that the revised plot is tighter and more explicit. The more prominent storyline enables Genet's characters to be more adumbrated and suggestive without the play as a whole becoming too abstract and consequently too challenging for the spectator. Genet skilfully manoeuvres scenic elements, shifting prioritisation constantly. As opposed to Artaud, materiality on his stage is not the result of iconoclasm or revolution. Genet is a pluralist for whom inclusion is preferable to abolition.

Genet and Artaud differ in that the former hoards forms, whereas the latter attempts to dust them away. The contrast between their conception of what the non-verbal entities left on stage actually signify, is more radical still.

For Artaud materiality is not representation. It is not art. It is 'la magie du réel', the apprehending of the 'real', the 'truth' and quintessence, without the distorting

¹ Under the acute conditions of the plague order collapses, authority evaporates, anarchy, disaster and conflagration prevail. Humans give vent to all the disordered impulses buried in their forgotten souls. The plague is a Rimbaudian 'dérèglement de tous les sens', a Dionysian release, a Bacchanalian exteriorisation of latent cruelty, a 'synthèse de tous les désirs et de toutes les tortures' ('Théâtre Alfred Jarry: Saison 1928', *Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), II, p. 30). The suppressed feelings of socialised humans who submit to laws misshapen by abstract, distant and essentially irrelevant precepts, are vented. Neuroses and aggressions are exorcised and the abscesses of the plague are drained to enable a cathartic liberation, an access to instinctual human psychic energy, an energy that has been sapped by thousands of years of Greco-Roman and Christian ideals that are regarded as insipid and yet repressive.

consequences of representation¹. Colour, rhythm and movement in Genet's theatre could not be further removed from this Artaudian truth, quintessence and real, whatever these terms might signify. For Genet the material is another layer of artifice that he adds to the dramatic illusion. It is vital to dissociate the material in Genet's theatre from any transcendence of form, and to anchor it firmly within form.

Artaud's dramaturgy can lead to a mysticism that professes to transcend the 'régime' of distorting representational symbols and to manifest some kind of essential meaning. Artaud claims to 'briser le langage pour toucher la vie', 'brûler des formes pour gagner la vie'². For him material forms are a direct translation of cosmic energies, they are 'des forces pures' that are transmitted through the actor's voice, movements and rhythms³. Visual and acoustic presence on stage leads to epiphanic paroxysm, the liberated expression of desire beyond the constraints of discursive form. 'Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry s'adresse à tous ceux qui ne voient pas dans le théâtre un but mais un moyen', he writes⁴. Theatre for him is not frivolous entertainment. It is not even the Brechtian site of instruction. His Theatre of Cruelty is the very pulse of civilisation according to its author. It is as sacred and essential to society as religion.

For Artaud by purging the theatre of dominant canonical forms which have been emptied of meaning, the way is paved for the true meaning to become apparent on stage. Colour, rhythm and movement in theatre are pre-babalian expression and not representation. He sees his Theatre of Cruelty as delivering the truth in all its undisputed unequivocalness: 'la pièce [...] donnera à la salle *l'impression d'une fatalité et du déterminisme les plus précis*'⁵. And the Balinese theatre for him is the '*théâtre de quintessence*'⁶. Artaudian theatrical production is a means towards an end, that end being

¹ Antonin Artaud, 'Théâtre Sacré', *Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), IV, p. 282.

² Antonin Artaud, 'Le Théâtre et la culture', in *Le Théâtre et son double*, p. 19, and 'Le Théâtre et les dieux', p. 202, respectively.

³ *Le Théâtre et son double*, p. 132.

⁴ 'Théâtre Alfred Jarry saison 1928', p. 27.

⁵ Artaud's italics, 'Théâtre Alfred Jarry saison 1928', p. 47.

⁶ Artaud's italics, 'Sur le théâtre balinais', p. 304. A physical theatre is for Artaud quintessential, because it is not codified. It is:

la parole secrète qu'aucune langue ne peut traduire. C'est en quelque sorte la langue perdue depuis la chute de Babel. Ce langage, cette langue perdue, cette sorte d'antique folie, cette vertigineuse utopie, en France quelques hommes ont cru la retrouver au théâtre. ('Le Théâtre d'après-guerre à Paris', p. 209.)

the manifestation of some kind of real beyond symbolic representation: 'La mise en scène, proprement dite', writes Artaud, 'les évolutions des acteurs ne devront être considérés que comme les signes visibles d'un langage invisible ou secret.'¹ Rhythm, intonation and acoustic effects in Artaud's theatre are the concrete manifestation of an abstract real². In his theatre of materiality the virtual becomes apparent, the spirit takes body. Expression is no longer a codified, rarefied metaphor. It is now part of the individual. The Théâtre Alfred Jarry is described as being in direct contact with life: 'En un mot, avec ce théâtre nous renouons avec la vie au lieu de nous en séparer'³. An iconoclastic sacrifice of forms leads to the chaotic liberation of real life.

To my mind Artaud's almost demiurgical pretensions lay him bare to numerous accusations. In spite of his sporadic enthusiasm for the semiotic ambiguity of signs, he could equally be condemned as an essentialist and a positivist, should he believe in the unequivocal meaning derived from material forms on his stage. Moreover, he does not define terms such as 'des forces pures', 'la vie' and 'le réel' that he purports to attain through rhythms and gestures. The purpose of my study is not to engage in any kind of interpretation of these terms. The important point is that Artaud's ambivalence, whether this vagueness be the inevitable consequence of any attempt to refer to a transcendental essence, or whether it be intended for Artaud's part - I suspect the former - is a sophistry that leads to a host of highly suspect misreadings and potential galimatias, because the theorist's advocacy of a theatre of material forms is associated frequently with frankly bewildering references to an ill-defined mystical beyond, a 'real' and a 'truth', phenomena that never enter Genet's poetics.

In his opinion through the non-verbal, as illustrated for example by the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, discursive systems of codification which have governed communication since the disaster at the Tower of Babel are smashed, and a quintessential, transcendental 'beyond' is reached.

¹ Antonin Artaud, 'Manifeste pour un théâtre avorté', in *Oeuvres complètes d'Antonin Artaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), II, p. 22.

² By way of example, I quote the following example from 'Sur le théâtre balinais':

Et ces râles, ces cris d'entrailles, ces yeux roulants, cette abstraction continue, ces bruits de branches, ces bruits de coupes et roulements de bois, tout cela dans l'espace immense des sons répandus et que plusieurs sources dégorge, tout cela concourt à faire se lever dans notre esprit, à installer comme une conception nouvelle et j'oserai dire concrète de l'abstraction. (Artaud's italics, p. 300).

³ 'Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry saison 1928', p. 15.

By way of example, a certain hokum is inherited by the next generation of Artaudian dramatists. Aspirations to reach an otherwise unknown 'real' through the materiality of rhythm and movement in theatre are reflected in the writings of the Anglo-French director Peter Brook, and in the concepts of The Living Theater, a 1950's and '60's American Artaudian theatre company. The Living Theater's overtly physical approach to performance could be aligned with that of Genet. However, its essentialist, almost religious theoretical stance is totally opposed. Julian Beck, a prominent member of The Living Theater, speaks in an interview with William Glover in 1961 of the experiences he witnesses on stage and in the audience in terms of a voyage of discovery that leads to a reconciliation with the 'nature of things'¹. The non-verbal is unrepresented reality according to The Living Theater. Brook, another Artaudian disciple who staged the first French production of Genet's *Le Balcon*, has written several works on the theory and practice of theatre, notably *The Empty Space*, *From Zero to the Infinite* and *There are no Secrets*². In spite of his undisputed genius as a director, Brook's theoretical pieces can lack consistency, contradictions becoming apparent. Though he might fail to reach definitive conceptual conclusions and solutions, this at times preventing a synthetic reading of his work, he nonetheless raises points of interest, and is moreover of worth because his theoretical writings are informed by the invaluable experience of having put Artaudian and Genetian dramaturgy into actual practice. For Brook there is an essential distinction between 'perception' through our inadequate representational symbols, and the infinitely more acute quality of 'awareness', which is the physical apprehending of the world³. A study of the actor's rhythm and movement exposed in *From Zero to the Infinite* reveals that speed, strain, space, frenzy, energy and brutality in the actor's movements are 'non-measurables possessing neither size nor weight', and yet they are 'more *real* than the concrete facts of life'⁴. In *The Empty Space* Brook sets out what he baptises the 'Holy theatre'. It mediates a return to the elementary primordialness of

¹ William Glover, 'The Living Theater', *Theatre Arts*, December 1961. In an interview with Pierre Belfond The Living Theater distinctly manifests nostalgia for a return to pre-Babalian origin. Reference is made to 'le sabre de feu' that 'nous a coupés du paradis créant la dualité, les contraires' (J. J. Lebel, *Entretiens avec le Living Theatre* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1969), p. 112). The Artaudian desire to dispense with the fissuring of representation and restore identity to a fullness of unity is clear.

² Brook's production took place in 1960, at the Paris Théâtre du Gymnase.

³ Peter Brook, *There are no Secrets: Thoughts on Acting* (London: Methuen, 1993), p. 84.

⁴ My italics, Peter Brook, *From Zero to the Infinite* (London: Methuen, 1991).

material poeticity that permits the discursive uncontainability of our existence to be expressed on stage:

I am calling it the Holy theatre for short, but it could be called The Theatre of the Invisible - Made - Visible.[...] We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful explanation of the various arts is that they talk of patterns which we can only begin to recognize when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes.¹

Resonances are clear of the Artaudian 'signes visibles d'un langage invisible ou secret.'² According to Brook through rhythm and shapes, which are an extension of the senses rather than a representational means, one does not merely 'perceive', one becomes 'aware', to employ Brook's terms³. From a marriage between the invisible and the visible on stage for a single, unrepeatable instant in Brook's messianic and in my opinion ill-defined terms, a door opens and vision is transformed, truth is born and the audience is awakened to an instant of deep insight into the fabric of reality⁴.

I do not deny the dramatic efficacy of the Artaudian theory of performance and production. However, I wish to separate stagecraft from witchcraft by refuting some of the connotations frequently associated with the use of the non-verbal and material in Genet's theatre. For Artaud and his followers a physical theatre of movement and rhythm is not symbolic abstraction or code. Through the material we exit the world of ephemeral, profane impressions drawn by plot, characterisation and verbal text, and access the hidden level of quintessential meaning. Here, the real is beheld in all its fullness: 'La réalité vue à la fois sur son recto et son verso' as Artaud says⁵. The eternal permanence of materiality in theatre is the external ally of an inner transcendental reality. I stress in the strongest terms that this concept is alien to Genet's poetics of the non-verbal.

More than any other non-fictional, non-dramatic work of Genet's, 'Quatre heures à Chatila' serves to clarify the artist's poetics. I seek to define Genet's concept of representation and then to show where non-verbal theatrical signs are situated within this concept.

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), p. 42.

² Antonin Artaud, 'Manifeste pour un théâtre avorté', p. 22.

³ Brook explains a dramatic device with which he requires his actors to experiment. An actor pauses during a play until the moment when he or she senses that the audience can no longer withstand the strain of silence. The silence in Brook's opinion becomes a theatrical 'voodoo pole' in which all invisible elements become one. Here, for him, the abstract becomes concrete.

⁴ See *There are No Secrets*, pp. 94, 86 and 84.

⁵ Artaud, 'Théâtre Alfred Jarry. Saison 1928', p. 34.

III. The Féerie and the Réel: 'Quatre heures à Chatila' and 'Entretien avec R. Wischenbart and Leyla S. Barrada'

'Quatre heures à Chatila', written in 1982, constitutes a fascinating insight into Genet's views on artistic symbols and their status as representation. In this article and the accompanying interview Genet appears to draw a distinction between what he refers to as 'la féerie' and 'le réel'. He at first seems to define the *féerie* in terms of a discursive world of inherited symbols, and the *réel* as a real world that exists beyond symbolisation. I must show how in fact Genet enables a deconstruction of this apparent dichotomy before I can define the non-verbal in his theatre as mutable, unstable codification and not permanent presence through the absence of code.

'Quatre heures à Chatila' is described by Albert Dichy, editor of Genet's posthumously published collection of texts *L'Ennemi déclaré*, as 'le texte politique et littéraire le plus marquant de ce recueil.'¹ Its uniqueness lies in its refusal to be readily identifiable. It situates itself within and yet beyond the bounds of any conventional genre. As Dichy writes in his annotations, 'ce texte déroge à ses propres déterminations' (p. 404). It refuses classification as pure journalistic reportage and yet provides a compelling and historically informative account of the aftermath of the Shatila and Sabra massacres². It refuses classification in terms of political commitment and yet is a flagrant condemnation of the Israeli government's decision to turn a blind eye on the brutalities of the massacre. It refuses classification as literature and yet displays all the charge and imagery of Genet's most poetic texts. It refuses classification as literary theory and yet it sheds invaluable light on Genet's poetics and enables me to situate the non-verbal within these poetics. For this reason, even though Genet himself seeks to dissociate this work from his literary oeuvre, I nevertheless study 'Quatre heures à Chatila' and the appended television interview in the light of Genet's creative and theoretical discourse.

¹ Albert Dichy, 'Notes et notices' for Jean Genet's 'Quatre heures à Chatila', in *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 403.

² These massacres were committed by the Haddad and Kataëb Christian militia in the refugee camps of Shatila and Sabra in the western suburbs of Beirut between 16 and 18 September 1982. They officially took the lives of 1500 Palestinians, unofficially 5000.

(i) The Artificial Quintessence of the Réel

In an interview with Madeleine Gobeil in 1964 Genet says ‘dans tous mes livres, je me mets nu et en même temps je me travestis par des mots, des choix, des attitudes, par la *féerie*’¹. For the Genet who wrote five novels and eight plays, both art and the world as we recognise and express it are composed of socially constructed signs that constitute a *féerie* - an inherited fable, a social fantasy, an illusion. Nearly twenty years later in an interview about his article ‘Quatre heures à Chatila’, Genet appears to claim that he has transcended this *féerie* and attained a *réel*:

Quand j’ai terminé l’écriture, j’avais trente-quatre ou trente-cinq ans. Mais c’était du rêve. C’était en tout cas une rêverie. J’avais écrit en prison. Une fois libre, j’étais perdu. Et je ne me suis retrouvé réellement, et dans le monde réel, qu’avec ces deux mouvements révolutionnaires, les Panthères noires et les Palestiniens. Et alors je me soumettais au *monde réel*. [...] Bref, j’agissais en fonction du *monde réel* et plus en fonction du monde grammatical...²

The self-conscious artifice, or ‘monde grammatical’ that Genet sought to create in his novels and plays served as a metaphor for the equally inauthentic nature of our existence, which he considered to be acted out according to the roles that society dictated. So does Genet exercise a puzzling tergiversation and now two decades later claim that a ‘real’ world exists beyond the remit of this artifice, this *féerie*? Wischenbart, one of the interviewers, remarks that even though Genet claims the Fedayeen in ‘Quatre heures à Chatila’ are the embodiment of the ‘real’ and are not guilty of performing inauthentic, empty gestures, the text nevertheless shares many traits with Genet’s creative writings, rendering it problematic to distinguish this article from the main body of his literary works, which freely credited their genesis to the *féerie*, the world of artifice. Wischenbart says ‘j’ai lu votre texte “Quatre heures à Chatila” non pas exclusivement en tant que témoignage, mais aussi comme un roman’ (pp. 277-278). Genet is quick to separate ‘Quatre heures à Chatila’ from the rest of his works: ‘Non, non, non’, he retorts vehemently, ‘ce n’est pas un roman, j’ai été vraiment là-bas’ (p. 278). Genet’s status as a first-hand eyewitness cannot be disputed³. But why does he insist that the Palestinian

¹ My italics, Jean Genet, ‘Entretien avec Madeleine Gobeil’, January 1964, in *L’Ennemi déclaré*, p. 22.

² My italics, Jean Genet, ‘Entretien avec Rüdiger Wischenbart et Layla Shahid Barrada’, recorded on 6 & 7 December 1983 in Vienna for Austrian radio and the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, in *L’Ennemi déclaré*, p. 277.

³ Genet was already residing in Beirut at the time of the massacres, and entered the camps as soon as the Israeli blockade had been lifted.

world is any less subjected to fictions than other societies? The interviewer again stresses the literary nature of this text, that echoes strongly Genet's earlier literary writings:

- *Mais c'est aussi l'écriture de ce texte qui rappelle beaucoup Genet le chroniqueur, le littéraire.*

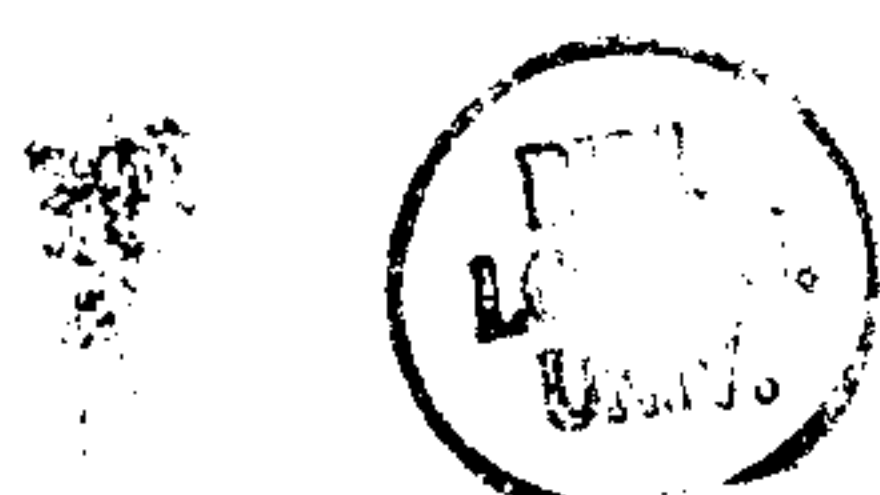
- Mais sentez-vous aussi le monde palestinien?

[...] - *Si vous voulez, on sent aussi bien le monde palestinien que le personnage qui l'a décrit* (pp. 278-279).

In this article Genet not only seems to believe that the Palestinians have succeeded in forging a new, authentic existence, but also that he himself is able somehow to embody this 'real' in his article. 'Do you not *feel* the Palestinian world?', he says. But how can black and white strokes and dots on paper possibly contain the reality of the Fedayee rebels? The answer is they cannot. There must be another way of issuing the theoretical labyrinth into which Genet leads the critic¹. Genet says 'vous ne sentez pas que la beauté est plus dans la réalité? Que cherchent les peintres? Que ce soit Rembrandt, Frans Hals, Cézanne? Est-ce qu'ils ne cherchent pas le poids d'une réalité?' (pp. 278-279). The solution to the apparently contradictory riddle of Genet's earlier works being a representation of *la féerie* - the falsity of socially constructed signs - and 'Quatre heures à Chatila' apparently upholding the notion of a separate *réel* is in Genet's very reference to *a* reality as opposed to one transcendent reality. The tanker can now be turned around. The permanence and stability of one single incarnation of an indisputable real beyond the transience of constructed signs do not exist for Genet.

Of course, nobody would deny that the atrocities in Shatila and Sabra took place. But Genet's own references to the concept of a *féerie* reincorporate this piece back into the main body of his literary oeuvre, and into his world of signs and images. He feels he has 'vécu la période jordanienne comme une féerie' (p. 263). He even states that the massacres should bear the subtitle of 'Songe d'une nuit d'été' and he refers to the events as 'cette féerie à contenu révolutionnaire' (p. 264). In spite of Genet's initial

¹ Genet states in the interview: 'Je suis trahi par celui qui m'écoute, tout simplement à cause de la communication. Je suis trahi par le choix de mes mots' (p. 283). Not only does Genet make a comment on the distance between the distance between what is uttered and what is received, a subject I discuss at length in Chapter Four, but the reader must also bear in mind Genet's occupation as a self-confessed and notorious liar in interviews. He admits that he frequently plays cat-and-mouse with interviewers for his own entertainment. For this reason I feel justified in arriving at a synthetic conclusion from the apparently contradictory statements he makes on the world and its representation, even though the author attempts to disenable this.



establishment of a contrast between the *réel* and the *féerie*, the essential meaning of both, one that is invaluable to any study of Genet's work, lies in the search for the essential, self-consciously artificial sign that will encapsulate the subject as effectively as the colour, texture and form of Cézanne's apples. The *réel* is the sign that has undergone a self-conscious process of distillation until it bears the consistency and durability of a solitaire diamond¹. It is a quintessence that does not deny its own artificiality. Such is Genet's conception of the socialised world and its representation. The Palestinians that Genet creates in the text are real, as real as a work of art: 'ils ont pris le poids des toiles de Cézanne. Ils s'imposent! Chaque Palestinien est vrai. Comme la montagne Sainte-Victoire de Cézanne. Elle est vraie, elle est là.'² The Palestinians themselves, with their reinvented identities, and the Palestinians in Genet's text are as self-consciously and meticulously constructed as a masterpiece. They are as real and present as the brushstrokes on a Cézanne canvas. 'Je ne peux dire la vérité qu'en art', says Genet in a 1964 interview with *Playboy* magazine³. The Genet of 'Quatre heures à Chatila' in fact regards the world and its artistic representation no differently from this. *Le réel* is made up of the *féerie*. The *féerie* is the discipline of form that constitutes Genet's *réel*, and as I go on to elucidate throughout this study, non-verbal form - material acoustics and visuals on stage - are another layer of artifice that contributes towards the construction of this *féerie*.

Ironically, Genet's theatre is redemptive, and not Artaud's. The liberation from any kind of essentialist meaning allows for meaning production both for the Palestinian guerillas and for Genet the artist. Genet's text 'embodies' the Palestinians because his agile somersaulting between literary, journalistic and theoretical styles reflects the manner in which the Palestinians reinvent themselves, inevitably within the limitations

¹ For the notion of the sign in terms of a 'diamond' in Genet's works see Thierry Dufrène, 'L'Ethique de l'art', *Magazine Littéraire*, 313, September 1993, p. 63. He quotes Genet, who applies this process of auto-essentialism to himself: 'Je veux me rendre simple, c'est-à-dire pareil à un épure, et il faudra bien que mon être gagne les qualités du cristal qui n'existe que par les objets qu'il laisse apercevoir.' Genet exists in terms of the form his life takes. Diamonds symbolise the weight, immobility and immutability of the quintessential image that has undergone a complex process of purification to strip it to its essentials. But like a diamond that serves as costume and decoration, Genet's essences never deny their own artifice.

² 'Entretien avec Rüdiger Wischenbart et Layla Shahid Barrada', p. 279.

³ Jean Genet, Interview for *Playboy* Magazine, 4 April 1964, later published as 'Par lui-même', *Magazine littéraire* (pp. 45-53), 1981, p. 32.

of inherited social discursivity¹. An absence of inherency enables Genet to create his own artificial quintessence of the *réel* out of the *féerie*. The *réel* is the dissemination of appearance, the perpetuation of iconography with which Rembrandt, Hals and Cézanne create an artistic reality on canvas without concealing the artifice of paint and brushstroke; with which the Palestinians create a social reality without masking their awareness that politics is a game played by actors; and with which Genet creates a literary presence and concurrently highlights this presence as illusion constructed out of strokes and dots on paper.

The constant *va-et-vient* between journalistic style and Genet's own private world of semiotics, his own meaning production process of distillation into quintessential signs that he elaborates in his theatre and fiction, gives the impression of work-in-progress. Genet's ramification and frequent diverging and converging illustrates his almost humble grappling with the tools of communication. Robert Fisk, a journalist who also attended the scene shortly after the massacre, writes 'what we found inside the camps at ten o'clock the next morning did not quite beggar description, although it would perhaps be easier to retell in a work of fiction [...]'² In one respect the relative freedom for reinvention afforded by the absence of essence yields a colourful celebration of liberation in the shape of Genet's works, that move freely between styles, forms, genres and approaches. Genet's mantra is that there is no mantra. In another respect the absence of any kind of permanence induces a certain anxiety. Genet's oeuvre is marked by this

¹ Numerous effects in the text point to Genet's cross-breeding of journalistic genre with figures he borrows from the literary style he cultivated in his novels and plays. This heterogeneity mirrors the Palestinians' refusal of type. Examples of literary devices employed include the following: The interpolation of two time-space frameworks - Shatila and Sabra, and Jerash and Ajloun in Jordan where Genet first met the Palestinian people a decade earlier (October 1970 to April 1971) - results in cinematic alternation and diegetic fragmentation, both prolifically used in Genet's novels. Other literary devices that are subsumed into Genet's journalistic chronicling include: exaggerated repetition of monosyllabic responses in dialogue; the projection of Genet's own homo-erotic fantasies onto the subject matter (the Fedayeen guerillas' guns are given phallic status, p. 245); the self-reflexive remarks on the act of writing (the topography of the Middle East is contrasted with the flatness of a sheet of paper); the use of literary figures, for example accumulation and most notably poetic metaphor, which often refers intertextually to his other works ('la morve dans les ronces', p. 262, which reminds us of the mucus and brambles of Saïd's family in *Les Paravents*; the corpses which are 'travaillés' (p. 247) like the statuesque fixity of the image in *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*; the Fedayee soldiers who adopt the gestures of their absent wives (p. 252), reminding us of Yeux-Verts' tattoo of his wife on his torso in *Haute Surveillance* or Pierrot emulating his dead brother's movements in *Splendid's*. Photographs are as important to the Fedayeen (p. 264) as they are to the Bishop, Judge and General in *Le Balcon*, and to the Pope in *Elle*).

² Robert Fisk, 'It was the Christians': The Massacre at Chatila, 16-17 September 1982', in *Pity the Lebanon*.

tension between a celebration of and an apprehension about artifice. I reveal on which side of the existential fence I consider Genet to sit in my final conclusion.

(ii) The Visible versus the Vide in Genet's Works

I have demonstrated the way in which Artaudian rhythm, colour, movement and voice in theatre serve as the visible manifestation of an invisible transcendental truth. For Genet, form is an end and not a means. Beyond the symbols that construct our identity and society there is no quintessence of truth. Genet's 'vide', itself part of the *féerie* of myths that compose our existence, must however be explained, so as not to be confused with any indication for Genet's part of a transcendental reality. The concept of 'le vide' is prevalent in Genet's works, as I illustrate throughout this dissertation, and it must be defined in the context of his poetics of representation in order to establish the position of material form in relation to this nothing, or *vide*.

Genet was only permitted to enter Shatila a day or so after the massacres. When he finally succeeded, the Israelis had already seized control. The dead bodies had not however been removed. Between the disfigured, dismembered corpses and the way in which they had arrived at this atrocious state, there was mystery and confusion¹. Genet refers to this state as 'cette "*vision invisible*"' (p. 247)². He writes: 'le tortionnaire comment était-il? Qui était-il? Je le vois et je ne le vois pas' (p. 257). The perpetrators of the acts of barbarism are absent. Only the corpses are left. Genet's use of the word 'invisible' could evoke Artaud's and Brook's belief in a transcendental invisible beyond, that can be translated into sacred manifestations. But Genet's reference to the absence of the murderers leads me to conclude that beyond the visible presence of representational symbols there is no 'truth' or 'real'. There is nothing. Genet writes 'il me crève les yeux et il *n'aura jamais d'autre forme* que celle que dessinent les poses, postures, gestes grotesques des morts travaillés au soleil par des nuées de mouches' (p. 247)³. The massacres for Genet will never possess any form except that of the stiff corpses. I began this chapter by posing Foucault's question: Is the self a transcendental fullness, or a 'rien' upon which social sediments are deposited? Genet is clearly situated at the latter

¹ Genet asks 'qui, en tuant, risquait sa peau? [...] Où sont passés les armes qui ont fait toutes ces morts? [...] Comment sont entrés les assassins dans les camps?' ('Quatre heures à Chatila', p. 257.)

² Genet's italics.

³ My italics.

end of Foucault's axis. For Genet, any meaning exists in the sedimentary layers themselves, and not in any Artaudian 'beyond'. Meaning is exclusively semiotic. Beyond or underneath the surface sediments of socialisation lies Foucault's 'rien', or Genet's 'vide'. A metaphorical extension for the reader of 'Quatre heures a Chatila' is that the reality of the Genetian world is no more than the sum of its vicarious manifestations in the shape of established forms, whether corpses or brush strokes on a canvas. The socialised world is a 'vision invisible', as Genet says about the corpses in 'Quatre heures a Chatila'. The visible embodies the eternally invisible, for nothing constitutes an immutable truth. This heavy emphasis on the visible, on surface, on form perhaps serves to explain Genet's self-conscious and overt use of non-verbal forms in his theatre. I develop further this idea, that is central to my dissertation, later in the chapter.

Artaud establishes a dichotomy between an invisible essence of truth and the visible manifestation of that truth. The concept of drawing his rituals from the depths of a liberated unconscious where morality, inhibition, refinement and conscience hold no sway but instead yield to an anarchistic rush of rhythmic beats, eroticism, savagery and flashing colour could not be further removed from Genet's aesthetic. There can be no bipartition in Genet's poetics between permanent, immutable substance and surface revealings of that permanence because, as I have explained, Genet's real and fable are one and the same. However, within Genet's world of ritualisation and theatricality he establishes a no less theatrical, wholly notional dichotomy between the image, and *le vide*. This *vide* is a constituent part of Genet's sustained investigation and manipulation of image and surface. Although Genet is certainly attracted to the darker underworld of the excluded and the anti-social, his *vide* is not Baudelairean corruption and decay that engenders a profusion of activity and humanity. It is not some essential presence or impossible fullness of total self-knowledge beheld when artifice is pierced. Nor is Genet's *vide* the 'visqueux' out of which crawls the anguished individual striving to exit the semi-conscious state of supine acquiescence illustrated by Beckett's tatterdemalions. And although Genet employs the Sartrean existentialist term *vide*, it is not a force negated by an existentialist commitment to active participation. True to form, Genet appropriates the word and refashions it to his own end. Genet's dichotomy between image and *le vide* is not veritably conflictual. It is wholly conceptual. It is not antithetical to his *féerie*. Genet's *vide* is an imaginary absence of form, that he fills with symbols.

The *vide* is the negative of the *féerie*, the world of illusion that we inhabit, but by implication it must also be a part of that *féerie*. It is a kind of ideational fable of nothingness, of non-meaning, within the fable of our existence. It is a positive negativity, for against its chimerical backdrop form can be acknowledged and celebrated. Notwithstanding, this is a draft definition of Genet's *vide*. Genet never betrays his commitment to a total absence of essential truth. He appropriates terms such as the *vide* and persistently reincarnates them, rendering it not only impossible, but also spurious to attribute one definitive signification to any one metaphor within his mega-metaphor, the *féerie*.

So, beneath the surface of socially constructed images, there lies the illusory *vide*. Genet himself provides a wonderfully illustrative analogy of his *vide* when describing a scab painted by Rembrandt: 'Dessous, les folaments de pus qui nourrissent cette croûte se continuent très loin... Parbleu, c'est tout l'organisme qui est au travail *pour* cette plaie.'¹ Existence for Genet is centrifugal. It is not the body that makes the scabs, but the scabs that make the body. Beneath the surface lies an illusory nothing. Artaud writes: 'l'absence est plus réelle que la présence parce qu'elle est éternelle, et elle est en somme réaction qui est plus immuable et permanente que l'action'². Genet's poetics of representation are diametrically opposed to this thesis. Absence for Genet is the blankness of the *vide*. Presence, surface, materiality, rhythm, distillation into artificially quintessential form, are the only guarantees of truth. Genet is the maestro of surface as opposed to substance, centrifugal illusion as opposed to centripetal essence, this serving to explain his overt use of non-verbal form in theatre. And his *tour de force* lies in his capacity to reduce the seeming opposite of illusion, the *vide*, itself to theatrical illusion.

IV. Refuting Extra-Discursive Critiques of Genet's Plays: Existence, Code and Performance

This dissertation deals primarily with non-verbal signifiers in Genet's theatre. However, now I have established the significations of the *féerie*, the *réel* and the *vide* in Genet's poetic, I refer briefly to his plays in more thematic and global terms, in order to counter

¹ Genet's italics, Jean Genet, 'Le Secret de Rembrandt', *Œ.C.*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), V, p. 32.

² 'Notes sur les cultures, p. 136.

the prevalent misreadings by Genet's critics who associate the playwright with a kind of plunge beyond the transient world of images in search of a metaphysical person within the socially mechanised person of discursive determination. I discuss the plays thematically in order to counter this misconception and to suggest that in all Genet's plays the metaphorical alternative to socialisation is only the *vide*. This interpretation will further allow me to explain just why the non-verbal is so significant in Genet's theatre.

In his article 'Genet's Dramatic Metamorphosis: From Appearance to Freedom' Jacques Ehrman considers Monsieur and Madame in *Les Bonnes* to be lost in the dizziness of illusion, whereas the maids struggle to inscribe themselves in the authenticity of real acts as opposed to socialised, ritualistic gestures¹. I argue that the maids' 'real' act of poisoning Madame fails. Claire herself drinks the herbal tea laced with a lethal measure of tranquilliser. 'C'est notre nuit à nous' exclaims Solange just before her sister commits suicide and she herself is taken to the obscurity of prison (p.107). To my mind Genet's caveat is that any attempt to transcend fatuous ritualised gestures is equally empty. Claire and Solange's act serves to construct Genet's *féerie*, his universe of artifice.

In *Splendid's*, the gangsters seek to refuse the image imposed upon them by the Police and the public by becoming cowards. To my mind, Genet rules out the option of an existential decision. By refusing their own image, which is an existence within the bounds of the *féerie*, the gangsters refuse everything. They do not attain any transcendental fullness of being. One of the gang, Pierrot tries to destroy his image by shooting his mirror reflection - '*Coup de feu. On voit l'image de Pierrot dans la glace, s'effondrer*'². In the first instant, Genet illustrates how the very gesture of attempting to destroy the symbolic can itself be nothing but symbolic. Pierrot's action is overtly metaphorical, the mirror that he shatters standing for the image in many of Genet's works. Secondly, reminiscent of the maids' vain attempts at transcendence in *Les Bonnes*, all that remains for Pierrot and his companions after their attempt to transcend

¹ Jacques Ehrman, 'Genet's Dramatic Metamorphosis: From Appearance to Freedom', *New Dramatists*, YFS 29 (1962), pp. 20-42.

² Genet's italics, Jean Genet, *Splendid's* (Décines: Marc Barbezat L'Arbalète, 1993), p. 106.

their image is no reflection at all, when the mirror shatters. Beyond our world of illusion lies a notional nothing.

Lucien Goldmann's 'Le Théâtre de Genet. Essai d'étude sociologique' sets out to explain that *Le Balcon* smashes through the glorification of the image displayed in Genet's former works and replaces the sterility of defunct ideologies with 'real' revolt:

la lutte des révoltés contre *Le Balcon* constitue une lutte entre la mort et la vie, entre l'ordre à l'intérieur duquel les valeurs n'existent que dans l'imagination et le rituel, et la tentative de créer un ordre nouveau dans lequel ces valeurs pénétreraient la vie elle-même et dans lequel la fuite dans l'imaginaire ne serait plus nécessaire parce que la vie serait devenue authentique.¹

Discursive ideologies are overthrown and replaced with the real political intention of the revolutionary partisans according to Goldmann. David K. Jeffrey in 'Genet and Gelber: Studies in addiction' also believes that genuine, sincere acts of rebellion take place, but he situates them on the side of the Chief of Police². According to him Genet's use of the play-within-the-play in *Le Balcon* sets unspontaneous characters whose very inauthenticity springs from their life within and for established rituals, against fresh characters who are free to improvise rebellion. For Jeffrey, Roger, Chantal and the other partisans do not embody the true spirit of revolt outside the distorting hall of mirrors because their power is still only symbolic. But the Chief of Police rises above the artificiality of symbols in the power struggle to head the nomenclature hierarchy, because he is firmly anchored in 'the real world', to quote Jeffrey. He never cedes to the temptation of whimsical roleplay and is thus the embodiment of the 'real' in the play. In his interview for *Playboy* Genet says 'tout le monde est ritualisé' (p. 31). His comment is all-inclusive. The revolutionaries are no exception. They are no less captivated by the universe of the image than Irma's customers. To my mind philosophy, politics and power, along with every other facet of our Genetian existence, can never divorce themselves from theatricality. They are forever destined to be a surface of illusory roleplay instead of a substance of genuine intent. In the same interview Genet alludes to revolutionary movements in terms of a closed circuit of theatricality and orthodoxy into which the authenticity of sincere, non-ritualised gestures can never enter: 'Tous les révolutionnaires se servent des moyens les plus académiques de la société qu'ils viennent

¹ Lucien Goldmann, 'Le Théâtre de Genet. Essai d'étude sociologique', *Revue de l'Institut de sociologie*, Université Libre de Bruxelles 3 (1969) pp. 20-21.

² David K. Jeffrey, 'Genet and Gelber: Studies in addiction', *Modern Drama*, 11 (1968), pp. 151-156.

de renverser ou qu'ils se proposent de renverser.'¹ For Chantal and Roger the uprising is an abstraction, vulnerable to the charades and fantasies in which the Bishop, the Judge and the General are immersed. They answer to what 'leur rôle [...] exige'² (p. 86). When Madame Irma expresses her consternation at the incessant shelling outside the Chief of Police reassures her: 'la révolte est un jeu [...], chaque révolte joue. Et il [le révolutionnaire] aime son jeu' (p. 85). The threat posed by the revolutionaries is erased because to attain power they will require figure-heads, symbols, emblems and the brothel itself just as much as the old regime did. Chantal, the prettiest prostitute at *Le Grand Balcon*, is elected as the insurrection's standard bearer, its emblem. 'C'est pour lutter contre une image que Chantal s'est figée en image', explains Roger somewhat desperately to a fellow revolutionary (p. 95). The word revolution returns to its Latin etymology 'voltare', meaning to return. All ideology is bound up in circular semiology, as the Bishop's mitre and Judge's scales are replaced with Chantal-as-a-dove.

In 'Genet's Dramatic Metamorphosis' Ehrman states, to my mind mistakenly that *Le Balcon* constitutes a turning point in Genet's ontological philosophy. With *Le Balcon* according to him Genet leaves behind the adulation of the image displayed in his preceding novels and plays, and shows the spectator the possibility of a path beyond vapid, defunct social rituals. Ehrman claims that whereas in *Les Bonnes* make-believe is the only life the maids know, in *Le Balcon* characters go beyond ceremonious roleplay³. He writes: 'reality brands ceremony as mere appearance'. For him reality attacks and hollows out the unreality of pure aestheticism. Roger's castration in the closing scenes of *Le Balcon* is viewed by certain critics, including Ehrman as a defining moment in Genet's theatre. For Ehrman Genet casts off the sterile world of illusion displayed in preceding plays and illustrated in the first four tableaux of *Le Balcon*. The roleplays of the Bishop, Judge, General and the tramp are rejected in favour of a genuine act that transcends all ceremony, namely Roger's castration. Roger replaces empty, hollow gestures that bear no 'functional' relation to the real world with an act that implicates

¹ 'Par lui-même', p. 27. In this dissertation I employ the term 'authentic' with reference to its etymological derivation from 'original author'.

² Unless otherwise stated, I refer to the 1962 version.

³ Ehrman of course contradicts himself here, for he formerly claims, as I state, that the maids in *Les Bonnes* are 'authentic and intense' compared with Madame and Monsieur who are 'ridiculous, artificial and prating'. (pp. 20-42).

real flesh and blood, his own¹. Roger's castration enables the revolutionary to smash his way out of the fairground hall of mirrors in which Stilitano in *Journal du Voleur* or Domino in *Adame Miroir* stood bemused, by breaking with established ritual². According to Ehrman Roger performs the ultimate moral act by shaping his own fate and indeed his own bodily morphology. But to my mind it is spurious to attribute to this scene such a dramatic volte-face in Genet's oeuvre, which until now is an empty shrine to our fake world of delusion and deception. Roger's act is not a rejection of the meaningless roleplay with which the other customers at *Le Grand Balcon* amuse themselves. It is not an act that cancels out the victim's tendency to perpetuate the oppressor's prestige. It is just another empty gesture in the roleplay that is life, the same as Stilitano and Domino's ritualistic gesticulations in front of mirrors. The reactionary heads of state in *Le Balcon* are replaced with an equally, if not more power-crazed Chef de la Police. Genet's revised 1962 stage directions tell us that the actor turns his back to the audience and '*fait le geste de se châtrer*' (p. 149)³. The actor performs the gesture, but are we certain he actually completes the act? This modification made by Genet after the 1960 production at the Théâtre du Gymnase could be in answer to the obvious logistical complications of a castration on stage. But it cannot be denied that Genet's revision adds yet another layer to the illusions at play. Who is to know whether the blood on Irma's carpets is really Roger's, or stage blood to be taken in the same vein as the fake crucifixes painted in *trompe-l'oeil* on the brothel's decor? Moreover, Roger is dressed up as the Chief of Police and performs his act in the fake mausoleum inside Irma's house of illusions. Roger himself admits that '*la lutte ne se passe plus dans la réalité, mais en champ clos. Sur un champ d'azur. C'est le combat des allégories*' (p. 95).

¹ The word 'fonction' in Genet's theatre dissociates the image from what it represents. Take for example the Bishop, for whom the trappings of the episcopal seat are of far more weight than the practicalities of the position: 'Or, évêque, c'est un mode d'être. C'est une charge. Un fardeau. Mitre, dentelles, tissus d'or et de verroteries, génuflexions... Aux chiottes la fonction' (p. 26). And whilst the town falls to the rebels the Queen in her palace is performing an activity that shows little regard for the welfare of the state: 'Elle brode' (p. 102). In addition, the Palestinian women in 'Quatre heures à Chatila' spend day and night embroidering their trousseaux while their male counterparts fight for a homeland (p. 262). The image is stressed over any practical considerations.

² The ballet *Adame Miroir* is based on a scene from *Journal du voleur* where Stilitano becomes confused by a fairground Hall of Mirrors. He fails to recognise the difference between his reflection and his body. In the ballet the mirror reflections of the dancer are played by dancers. The reflections initiate gestures, which the main dancer Domino must follow in order to exist. Domino is not even a pretext for his image: he exists only in terms of his image.

³ Genet's italics

So does he actually castrate himself? The closed circuit of images reflecting images *ad infinitum* is surely not thrown open, contrary to what some critics might assume.

Without wishing to attribute a definitive interpretation to this scene, for I feel this would betray the elusiveness of Genet's poetic symbols, the conclusion, if any that I might draw is that for Genet the sign is a metaphoric castration that replaces the world's substance, its flesh, with an empty shell, a surface of meaning. Genet describes the artificial quintessence, the pinnacle of representation encapsulated by one of Rembrandt's paintings as 'cette sorte de pureté, si évidente dans son dernier portrait qu'elle en est presque blessante'¹. Quite contrary to Ehrman's claim that castration is a reintegration into the 'real', castration is the total ceding to the symbolic. The world's flesh and bones, its substance, are replaced by an image. Genet explains this in his *Playboy* interview when he says 'le drapeau comme signe de reconnaissance, comme emblème autour de quoi on se regroupe, c'est devenu une théâtralité qui châtre, qui fait mourir' (p. 28). Representation wounds us, as Roger wounded himself by forsaking his own sex organs in a gestural attack on power within the *champ clos* of discourse.

'C'est une image vraie, née d'un spectacle faux', says the Envoy, most aptly (p. 122). The spectre of the image conceals a fictional *vide* as empty as Chef de la Police's mausoleum, which is described as 'les tombeaux s'enchâssant dans les tombeaux, les cénotaphes dans les cénotaphes, les cercueils dans les cercueils, les urnes...' (p. 141.) - vessels of emptiness containing nothing other than more vessels of emptiness in a metaphorical infinity of the *vide*: 'illuminé. Eclatant... mais vide' (p. 34). The Bishop encapsulates the dynamic of *Le Balcon* in the following words: 'La pureté ornementale, notre luxueuse et stérile - et sublime - image' (p. 130). The socialised world in *Le Balcon*, as in all Genet's plays, runs no deeper than the surface of the images that create it. The two opposites, the *réel* and the *féerie*, remain one and the same. Genet himself brands *Le Balcon* '*la glorification de l'Image et du Reflet*'². The circuit around which the image and its infinity of reflections prevail is well and truly closed by the playwright himself.

¹ 'Le Secret de Rembrandt', p. 36.

² Genet's italics, Jean Genet, 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*', in *Le Balcon* (Décines, Marc Barbezat - L'Arbalète, Folio, Gallimard, 1962), p. 12.

Les Nègres and not *Le Balcon* is heralded by many critics as Genet's attempt to transcend discursivity. I counter this claim too. In the opinion of Tom F. Driver, whereas in many of Genet's plays behind the architecture of words and gestures there exists no transcendental meaning, in *Les Nègres* there is a will to set free what he calls the 'real phenomena' inhabiting the nether world, that lie trapped beneath the obsessions with illusion and appearance implicit in our society¹. All *Les Nègres*' depictions are of epiphenomena, but according to Driver when these epiphenomena disappear we are not plunged into nothingness. Instead Genet's rhythms, colours and gestures lead our descent into the primordial flux of energy. Whether wittingly or not, Driver's reading of Genet is clearly Artaudian. He writes 'Genet [shatters] the "atoms" of normal consciousness, letting loose the energies of which they are composed. One is fascinated by the potential of energy thus released' (pp. 40-41). In Driver's study Artaud's Nietzschean call for a liberation of desire is echoed, as is Artaud's belief that materiality is a conduit for cosmic energies. For Driver the Genet of *Les Nègres* has laid down his magician's hat once and for all and renounced his frivolous conjuring of chimeras of nothingness:

Narcissism, impulsive attraction to form, and ontological nihilism give way to a kind of ontological affirmation. Outside the self's hall of mirrors there is 'something'. We may call it energy. However wild and terrifying, it is 'there' (p. 41).

Driver's references to a 'something' that is 'there' beyond discourse are spurious to my mind. Allan Francovich echoes Driver's opinions, referring to the rhythms in *Les Nègres* as the rediscovery of the primaeval pulse of nature which once determined all movement. He writes 'by rescuing the world from the banalization we inflict upon it, we rescue ourselves: all the terror we need is the terror of possessing ourselves. We have forgotten the drum beat by which we once stalked ourselves.'² From Francovich's words it would appear that Artaud's pre-Babalian, prelinguistic pulse is retrieved in *Les Nègres*. Throughout this chapter however I stress that beyond the *féerie*, 'outside the self's hall of mirrors', there is nothing. During the rest of this dissertation I illustrate how non-verbal rhythms and movements in Genet's theatre contribute towards the construction of illusion, and are in no way exterior to that illusion.

¹ Tom F. Driver, *Jean Genet* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, Columbia, 1966), p. 40.

² Allan Francovich, 'Genet's Theatre of Possession', *Tulane Drama Review*, 14, [? d.] 1, p. 45.

Monique Borie seems to see the black struggle in *Les Nègres* as a possibility to replace an externally imposed impression of identity with an inner transcendental certainty of inherent blackness:

Lorsque Genet, dans *Les Nègres*, va introduire, au-delà de la confusion des opposés la possibilité d'entrevoir une unicité échappant aux formes et aux Images de l'ordre dominant, c'est hors d'une théâtralité qui reste sous le signe même de cette confusion, qu'il inscrira cette possibilité.¹

Creation and invention replace imitation and performativity according to Borie. The Blacks' fight for emancipation is said by some to rise above the habitual theatricality of revolutionary struggles and to present a 'real', genuine struggle. '*Les Nègres* représentent la pureté; révoltés, ils n'ont pas un enjeu dans le système sociale', writes one critic in a programme of the Théâtre des Amandiers². Homer Swander even goes so far as to say that Genet's insistence upon the presence of a real white person amongst the spectators proves that the battle between Black and White in *Les Nègres* is in earnest³. For Swander *Les Nègres* constitutes a break from Genet's former homage to the image. The racial hatred is real, he says. When the curtain drops the real black actors perpetuate their hatred in the real world. Swander echoes Jeffrey's sentiment on Genet's use of the play-within-the-play in *Le Balcon*. He claims that the black ceremony is a diversionary tactic with which the *real* war is won. The games on stage merely serve to highlight just how real the 'real' off-stage really is. I categorically disagree with these views. Genet himself, in an article entitled 'L'Art est le refuge' explains that the actors on his stage are nothing more than aesthetic symbols: 'Les figures qui vont surgir de cette langue peuvent-elles être autre chose que la projection là, sur la scène, de ces fantômes en quoi je voudrais métamorphoser de vraies Nègres?'⁴. The moment real black actors step on stage they become a blank screen upon which Genet projects his illusions, as I illustrate in Chapter Six with reference to the actor's performance. Any claim that Genet stages non-theatrical battles is therefore misplaced. In his 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*' Genet states that any social or political issue, which in any case is essentially theatrical, is immediately

¹ *Mythe et théâtre aujourd'hui*, pp. 102-103.

² *Les Bonnes*, Théâtre des Amandiers, dossier 8, 1973, Centre dramatique national de Nanterre.

³ Homer D. Swander, 'Shakespeare and the Harlem Clowns: Illusion and comic form in Genet's *Les Nègres*', *Yale Review*, 55 (1965), pp. 209-226.

⁴ Jean Genet, 'L'Art est le refuge', in *Les Nègres au port de la lune*, ed. by C.D.N. Bordeaux (Bordeaux: Editions de la différence, 1988), p. 102.

emptied of extra-scenic repercussions, once on stage¹. The battle between the Blacks and the White Court in *Les Nègres* takes place on the theatrical field of images. Driver's answer to any doubts about whether authenticity can exist outside discursive dictate is that political, social and religious systems are simply manifestations of a 'ceaseless underlying energy', an innate human force. They are Artaud and Brook's visible manifestations of an invisible real 'that casts up in its irrational way the phenomena which we call, in the aggregate, life' (p. 40). But to my mind revolt and the reinstatement of power in Genet's theatre are eternal forms in a circular geometry of socially constructed performativity. A Black is executed off stage, white power, ruthlessness and injustice merely being replaced by their black counterparts. Again, the circuit of illusions hermetically shuts out the opportunity for real confrontation. The catafalque did not contain the booty of a war waged against the Whites, it contained nothing, *le vide*. Beyond symbols Genet provides only more symbols, even if they are symbols of nothing.

For certain critics the Blacks do not merely reconfigure black identity. They also reinvent other established social pillars such the male and the female, and love. Lewis Cetta's 'Myth, Magic and Play in Genet's *Les Nègres*' tells us that Diouf and Félicité embody the mythological grass roots notions of motherhood and fatherhood as opposed to western patriarchal and matriarchal icons². For him this forging of new, more 'real' notion of parenting is symptomatic of a liberation from the constraints of social

¹ In the 'Avertissement' to *Le Balcon* Genet has the following cautionary note for any artist with political intent:

Quelques poètes, de nos jours, se livrent à une très curieuse opération : ils chantent le Peuple, la Liberté, la Révolution, etc., qui, d'être chantés sont précipités puis cloués sur un ciel abstrait où ils figurent, déconfits et dégonflés, en de difformes constellations Désincarnés, ils deviennent intouchables. Comment les approcher, les aimer, les vivre, s'ils sont expédiés si magnifiquement loin? Ecrits, parfois somptueusement, ils deviennent les signes constitutifs d'un poème, la poésie étant nostalgie et le chant détruisant son prétexte, nos poètes tuent ce qu'ils voulaient faire vivre.' (p. 16)

Here, Genet stresses that political intentions transposed into art become stultified into empty slogans. Genet rejects any Sartrean notion of *Littérature engagée*, maintaining that both within and without the bounds of art the world is one of folklore, fantasy, fairytale. In *Lettres à Roger Blin* Genet writes with respect to *Les Paravents* 'ma pièce n'est pas l'apologie de la trahison. Elle se passe dans un domaine où la morale est remplacée par l'esthétique de la scène' (p. 22.) The same triumph of aesthetic form over content applies to *Les Nègres*. But Genet also goes one step further. As I have elaborated in detail in this chapter, political revolution is possible neither on nor off stage, for all action simply repeats past ideological models and all acts, not just those on stage, are bound up in artifice and are acted out in the arena of theatricality.

² Lewis Cetta, 'Myth, Magic and Play in Genet's *Les Nègres*', *Comparative Literature* 11 (1970), pp. 511-525.

discourses. The Blacks enter the stage at the beginning of the play and exit at the end to the music of Mozart's Don Juan. According to Cetta the choice of music symbolises unrepentant, unrepressed libertine pleasure. I disagree with this reading, or rather misreading of Genet's theatre in which identity is no deeper than a surface of image and illusion. The option of creating wholly new identities is not open to the Blacks. It is not open to anyone. Any new black identity will only derive from established social discourse, because beyond discourse there exists nothing. The play begins with Archibald and the other Blacks ridiculing themselves as they dance a waltz in ill-fitting western dinner suits and evening gowns. In Blin's ending to the play the Blacks dance the same waltz, this time with added grace¹. They are no nearer towards breaking the mould of imposed white discourses.

Jean Deock in '*Les Nègres aux U.S.A.*' claims that the reason why the Queen dozes during the much-awaited love scene between Village and Vertu is that the White Court fails to recognise the real, true love that the Blacks have invented, and therefore loses interest in the plot². Richard Coe in *The Vision of Genet* states that Village and Vertu are finally able to love 'blackly'. But to my mind the Blacks are no more able to love 'blackly' than they are able to rediscover truly 'black' identities. During the closing scene of *Les Nègres* Village and Vertu concede that their mission to forge black love distinct from white Hollywood love has failed. Like Grace and Cary, Ginger and Fred, they hold hands, kiss and slow-dance together.

According to some critics the dream of transcending the profanity of symbolic codification and social ceremony is realised by Saïd and Leïla in *Les Paravents* more than by any other Genetian character. I counter this. Saïd is described by Ehrman as the most positive hero ever because he not only refuses colonial rule, but is also reluctant to become fixed into the image of a rebel leader. He therefore exists outside symbolisation. For Borie, Leïla too resists symbolisation. Her covered face is the refusal of physionomical representation. Borie writes '[...] est-ce la figure du sans-visage ou bien la négation de toute figure? En tout cas, ou bien il brise le jeu des reflets et des Images ou bien il introduit en eux l'Innomable' (p. 96). For Borie Leïla's mask is the triumph of the

¹ Genet says '*cette façon d'achever la pièce a ma préférence*', '*Pour jouer Les Nègres*', in *Les Nègres*, p. 11.

² Jean Deock, '*Les Nègres aux U.S.A.*', *Obliques*, 2, (1972), p. 49.

unnameable, the unrepresented. But surely the concealment of Leïla's face by a hood only reinforces the self-conscious theatrical notion of the mask that conceals the face. Leïla's identity runs no deeper than her hood, just like La Mère's gesture towards the newly-wed couple runs no deeper than an empty suitcase (p. 23)¹. In *Les Paravents* the very fact that screens are used, with their visible borders which frame the play, shows both metaphorically and visually that outside discourse there is no existence, only the *vide* against which constructed forms - the screens - become discernible. I elaborate this idea in detail in Chapter Six².

Ehrman heralds Saïd as the literary world's most positive hero. I however advance Saïd as the most negative hero ever. He metaphorically embodies the negativity of the *vide*. The choice afforded to him and to all of us is either incarnation as an image, or disappearance into the Genetian *vide*. A third way is not available. The characters in the play are grouped and defined according to a double trend: upwards through death to the ultimate theatrical status of the pure image, or downward into *le vide*, which is equally theatrical, and ultimately no different. Saïd and Leïla refuse to become pure effigies, so they do not ascend to the highest platform. Instead, they are represented by disappearance and 'nothing'. In reply to La Mère's request that everyone await the arrival of her messianic son, Kadidja replies 'pas la peine. Pas plus que Leïla, il ne reviendra pas' (p. 276). The couple are not represented on the platform of images. Saïd and Leïla have chosen 'nothing' instead of an illusory world constructed of images. *Les Paravents* constitutes the ultimate display of theatricality. Not only of theatricality within theatre, but of theatricality in life. Genet shows how the opposite to theatricality is plainly nothing. There is no choice other than theatricality, code and performance.

Saïd and Leïla themselves disappear into the *vide* of non-representation because they refuse the imageries both of colonialism and of post-colonialist independence. They are nevertheless immortalised 'dans une chanson' by the Arab rebels. In this play Genet reintroduces the concept that all revolutionaries without exception are the products of reactionary discourses (p. 276). According to Richard Coe the Arabs adopt ugliness as their genuine, authentic identity, as they refuse to succumb to the discipline of form

¹ Unless otherwise stated, I refer to the 1976 version of the play.

² The use of 'tableaux' in *Le Balcon* and *Les Paravents*, with their allusion to framing and structure, also indicates that all existence is within the bounds of form.

imposed by the colonialists. This critique is reminiscent of Borie's view that the Blacks in *Les Nègres* refind 'true' black identity. But Genet himself stresses that the infatuation with image prevails in both camps¹. Ommou admonishes the Arab soldiers, telling them that they are as much slaves to images as the French army is². But Ommou herself falls prey to illusion, for she transforms Saïd into 'le chant'³. Behind the shiny chevrons and polished spats of the colonialists lies nothing: 'l'uniforme, les galons, les décorations, et le brevet d'état-major quand on est breveté!... Et qu'est-ce qui reste? Le vide' (p. 238). But behind the tatters and grime of the Arab image nothing can be seen either. In his notes on the Tenth Tableau Genet describes how the Arab guard should be the mirror image of the colonialist Gendarme, and how the acting style of the arsonist terrorists and of Sir Harold and M. Blankensee, should be one and the same (p. 119). No character exists beyond the discursive limits of stereotyped representational symbols. *Les Paravents* ends symbolically when '*la scène est vide*' (p. 66)⁴. The 'chant' of Genet's dramatic poetry retreats into the wings and the audience is confronted with the *vide* of the empty stage. Genet ends the play by illustrating metaphorically his conceptual dichotomy of the image and the *vide*. Without symbols we are left with nothing. Not the nothing of non-representational truth and reality, but the symbolic nothing that serves only to underscore the vital pre-eminence of signs.

So, for Ehrman and Goldmann Genet's break with form and illusion occurs with *Le Balcon*. For Driver and Francovich it occurs with *Les Nègres*. For Borie presence without representation is achieved in *Les Paravents*. The fact that for example in 1956 alone Genet was in the throes of writing *Le Bagne*, *Le Balcon*, *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents* almost simultaneously, makes the idea of pinpointing a rubicon in Genet's poetics problematic, in that there is little chronological linearity in the development of his dramatic oeuvre. More importantly, these critics fail to account for the fact that, out

¹ Genet stresses his non-discriminatory attitude towards his own characters: 'je puis vous affirmer que, par exemple, je n'ai méprisé aucun de mes personnages - ni Sir Harold, ni le Gendarme, ni les Paras.' (*Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 64.) No character is any more or less false than the next.

² Ommou's speech to the Arab soldiers - 'front contre front, nez contre nez, menton-menton, jabot-jabot [...]' (p. 203) mirrors exactly the Lieutenant's inciting of the Sergeant to be resplendent through his image (p. 182.). I analyse this parallel in greater detail in Chapter Five.

³ Jean Genet, *Les Paravents* (Décines: Marc Barbezat L'Arbalète, 1961), Dix-septième tableau, pp. 222-260.

⁴ Genet's italics.

of the newly tapped flux of energy, out of the supposed resistance to social norms to which they refer, is simply born a new rank of rituals, oppressions and revenge, in the cases of *Le Balcon*, *Les Nègres* or *Les Paravents*. And in the cases of *Les Bonnes*, *Splendid's* and *Haute Surveillance*, the only alternative to a life of illusion is nothing. The Prison Guard's knowing wink at the end of the 1965 *Haute surveillance* says it all. The argument between predestination and free will that dominates the theatres of Claudel, Sartre and Salacrou is cancelled out as the guard mocks Lefranc's futile attempt to decide his own fate. Lefranc seeks to forge his own identity as a murderer by strangling Maurice. He was destined always to be a petty criminal and never to attain the infamy of Boule de Neige and Yeux-Verts, the prison's two most notorious inmates. He attempts to step outside the dictate of established forms, to be 'contre tout le monde', and now he has only to await the gallows, and the emptiness of death without a God¹.

It has been of vital importance to counter any metaphysical, transcendental or essentialist readings of Genet's plays, in order to stress that his use of the non-verbal must never be confused with any intention for his part to negate the fundamental role played by representation, roleplay, ceremony, code and performance in our existence. Existence *is* image, personhood *is* impersonation, the face *is* the mask, substance *is* surface,. The only impossible, unattainable, wholly metaphorical, and no less symbolic opposite Genet provides to image, impersonation, surface and the mask, is the *vide*.

One need look no further than the titles Genet gives to each of his plays, to see the extent to which the dynamic of illusion and the *vide* dominates the writer's works.

V. Surface and the Titles of Genet's Plays

It is no coincidence that almost all Genet's plays bear titles alluding to the notion of surface and image, or to the concept of the subject in terms of an amalgam of imposed discursive fictions.

¹ Jean Genet, *Haute surveillance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 27. In the three earlier versions of *Haute surveillance* of 1949, 1965 and 1968, Lefranc is obsessed with Boule de Neige. In the final version however the marked absence of Boule de Neige's name from Lefranc's dialogues emphasises the man's desire to go 'solo'. In future references to the play I allude to the 1988 version, unless otherwise stated.

The title *Haute surveillance* alludes to the paranoid individual's every action being determined by the panoptic gaze, the deathwatch of another¹. *Les Bonnes* is a play the very essence of which is image and social roleplay, in that the two sisters literally dress up. Here, Genet makes ingenious use of the homonym 'les bonnes', which at the same time means 'the maids' and 'the right ones'. The two maids, who play-act at being Madame in her absence, throw the audience into relentless confusion as to whether at any one moment they play intentionally or unwittingly themselves, Madame or each other. Which maid is actually Claire, and which one plays Claire while the other plays Madame? 'Je suis la bonne' exclaims one of the maids (p. 31). Does she mean 'I am the maid'? Does she mean 'I am the right one'? And which one *is* 'the right one' anyway? (p. 47)². The costume, the word, the gesture, are all hollow signs, behind which there is nothing.

A balcony is the part of a building on which the inhabitants parade themselves in front of the outside world. When Solange brags about having framed Monsieur she runs out onto the balcony (p. 101). The balcony is a superficial façade like a mask. This helps to explain the title of Genet's play *Le Balcon*, for the Queen, Bishop, Judge and General also step out onto the balcony in this play, when they reclaim power.

The screens of *Les Paravents*, like masks, slide back and forth. Because they constitute the whole set, when they are wheeled off the stage they reveal just more screens, or else the absence or metaphorical *vide*, which illustrates the impossibility of existence beyond theatricality.

Penal colonies are an essential leitmotif throughout Genet's works. Albert Dichy, writer of the introductions to Genet's three posthumously published plays *Elle*, *Splendid's*, and *Le Bagne*, describes penal colonies as Genet's 'sanctuaire de l'imaginaire'³. Because in theory anyone sent to a penal colony never returns to tell the tale, this overseas unknown allows images to inhabit it. It is the criminal underworld's

¹ In *Surveiller et Punir* Michel Foucault describes the panoptic prison layout devised by Jeremy Bentham. One guard is surrounded by a circle of cells that are constantly within his sight. 'Autant de cages, autant de petits théâtres, où chaque acteur est seul, parfaitement individualisé et constamment visible.' (Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) p. 202). The theatricality of the prisoner who plays a role, watched by the guard, is highlighted here by Foucault. The architecture of the Petite Roquette prison where Genet was held in 1926 was incidentally panoptic.

² Unless otherwise stated, I refer to the 1976 version of the play.

³ Albert Dichy, 'Présentation du Bagne', in Jean Genet, *Le Bagne* (Décines: Marc Barbezat, L'Arbalète, 1994), p. 5.

most hallowed mythology. In *Journal du Voleur* Genet describes penal colonies as the ‘idéale région du malheur et de la pénitence [...] [le] voisinage [...] dans la conscience, des modèles sublimes, des grands archétypes du malheur’ (p. 288). Regardless of the actual nature of the penal colony, for Genet it becomes the symbol of desperate unhappiness, a source of exaltation, an incarnation into whatever he desires. The penal colony awaits the image of ‘le bagné’ in order to be represented. *Le Bagné* is therefore a fitting title for what Genet intended to be his greatest play¹.

As for *Les Nègres*, Bobo, one of the Blacks performing the ritual killing of a white girl, refers to night falling by saying ‘il y fait noir comme dans le trou du cul d’un nègre. - Oh! pardon, d’un Noir. Il faut être polie’ (p. 69). ‘Nègre’, the term used in the title of the play, is a derogatory term used to label Blacks, labels being forced upon the individual in the same manner as images.

Many of the titles of Genet’s plays encapsulate the notion that at the heart of his theatre there is no heart. There is a symbolic *vide* which is concealed and revealed by illusion and image.

VI. Conclusion: Tyranny or triumph of the image

At the beginning of this chapter I alluded to Foucault by introducing the post-war preoccupation with the origin of the subject. Genet’s theatre involves an attempt to define and represent the self on stage. He reveals our existence as residing in Foucault’s sediments of art and sophistication that are deposited by society. It does not lie beneath these sediments. The individual is centred around no core of essential meaning. Any essence is in illusion, surface image and artifice. Even the opposite to illusion, the *vide*,

¹ *Le Bagné* was to be one of the main components of an immense series of seven plays called *La Mort* that Genet intended to write. This series was to be introduced by a prose poem called *La Nuit*. *Les Paravents* was to be the opening play, with *Le Bagné* second. However, the writing of *Le Bagné* appeared always to be dogged by unfavourable events in the writer’s life. The first draft had already been written by the time Genet was granted a presidential pardon in 1949. But a completely fallow period ensued, the sudden sense of freedom apparently proving overwhelming for him. Although he wrote to his American agent Bernard Frechtmann in 1959 claiming that if he managed to finish *Le Bagné* it would be his greatest play, when his lover Abdallah committed suicide in 1964 he destroyed his latest draft. The play was destined never to be published during his lifetime. The 1994 version is therefore unfinished and there is no indication as to which parts of the play Genet was happy with, and which were causing him trouble.

is itself illusion. In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* Genet describes the day the essence of meaning was exposed as fallacy, image and illusion:

Et le miracle eut lieu. Il n'y eut pas de miracle. Dieu s'était dégonflé. Seulement un trou avec n'importe quoi autour. Une forme jolie, comme la tête en plâtre de Marie-Antoinette, comme les petits soldats, qui étaient des trous avec un peu de plomb mince autour (p. 184).

God is nothing more than the crucifix or the bishop's ring that represents him. Form in Genet's world metaphorically wrests us from the flux of the *vide*. Beneath the surface there is a notional nothing, the nothing that Genet saw when peering inside the hole left by the bun broken off Marie-Antoinette's bust. Now that faith in real substance is shattered, Genet has no option but to cling onto the wreckage of representation: the visible, the concrete. The two sisters in *Les Bonnes* are consumed with terror as the world drifts away from them:

CLAIRE Tu sais bien que les objets nous abandonnent.

SOLANGE Les objets ne s'occupent pas de nous (p. 93).

The world does not speak to us or for us. It leaves us to decode its enigmas in the only way we know - through discursive form. Post-war society has lost the metaphysical redemption of religion and extreme politics. Artaud's solution is to 'brûler les formes pour gagner la vie'¹. He seeks to rid society of ritual and artifice, whether religious, political, social or aesthetic, to reveal the naked, universal self behind them. But for Genet these religious and social rituals shape our lives. For the Photographer in *Elle* the miracle of no miracle takes place when he discovers that when the Pope climbs down from his roller skates and reveals his backless papal robes, he is a nobody. But genuflection and prayer nonetheless remain reassuring rites for him, as he says: 'Je me sens tout à coup soulagé d'avoir pu accomplir un geste qui me restituait à un mode cérémonieux, donc définitif.'² The image is as adamant, impregnable and eternal as a solitary diamond. Through the image the self is reified. Genet seeks a universal definition of human identity. He finds it in artifice and ceremony.

¹ 'Le Théâtre et les dieux', p. 202.

² Jean Genet, *Elle* (Décines, Isère: L'Arbalète, 1989), pp. 40-41.

The self is a construct, and not a kernel of repressed desires and energies as Artaud might imply. The Pope in *Elle* says ‘quand je me vide de cette matière fumante, je suis plus près de Dieu’ (p. 50). The Pope is hollowness surrounded by the papal apparel of robes, rings and ritual. Defecation, like the castration to which I referred in *Le Balcon*, is the removal of substance that leaves only the empty image. The primordial part played by castration, defecation and most notably death in Genet’s works reflects the metaphorical substitution of organic vitality with a suit of illusory armour. Death in Genet’s oeuvre is the metaphorical replacement of the world with the signs that represent that world. A person ‘gagne sa réalité quand elle s’éloigne, s’absente, ou meurt’, says the Envoy at the Grand Balcon¹. Death is the vector out of which reality is born and into which it disappears. In *Le Funambule* Genet writes:

La Mort - la Mort dont je te parle - n’est pas celle qui suivra ta chute, mais celle qui précède ton apparition sur le fil. C’est avant de l’escalader que tu meurs. Celui qui dansera sera mort - décidé à toutes les beautés, capable de toutes (p. 14).

In Genet’s poetic death haunts us in life. Life does not precede death. The image is not a forecast for the future, but rather a mythic rite in memory of a past event, a rite of death into which we are born.

This chapter has illustrated how Genet’s *féerie* is a prerequisite to any *réel*. All notions of an empirical ‘real’ and lucid transitivity of consciousness are inapplicable to Genet’s view of existence. For Genet we live on the terms of appearance. We can only pick out a perfectly formed apple because Cézanne has shown us what it looks like. We only recognise a significant event in history because text books inform us of its import². Irigaray wishes women to perceive themselves more than just as fragments as I explained in Chapter One. For Genet this is impossible. We have no means by which to contemplate anything beyond representation because our existence is on its terms. We are thrown back upon ourselves within the closed circuit of discursive form, like the somersaulting tumblers in my introduction, in quotation of our own voices. The infinite metonymy between linguistic signs originates not in a ‘real’, but on the primary metaphor that killed the ‘real’: the sign, the image, language. Representation is not a correspondence theory, but a disappearance theory.

¹ The Envoy speaking about the Queen, p. 137.

² As the Envoy in *Le Balcon* says, ‘l’Histoire fut vécue afin qu’une page glorieuse soit écrite puis lue’ (p. 123.)

In his 'Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert' Genet writes '*au théâtre, tout se passe dans le monde visible et nulle part ailleurs*' (p. 13)¹. If life for Genet is image, surface, presence and the concrete, then no art form represents life better than theatre. Theatre is total presence in the *hic et nunc*. And if life is a superstructure of preconceived acts and words, a surface of rituals that are devoid of inherent meaning, then no medium in theatre stands as a better metaphor for the pre-eminence in our lives of expression over content, than Genet's emphasis on the signifier - on non-verbal acoustic and visual form.

In an interview with Bettina Knapp the director Roger Blin refers to Genet's implicit sense of 'fair-play'². Genet reveals the nature of our existence with candid honesty. Form enslaves us. Genet's solution is to celebrate form, as he writes in his 'Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert': 'si l'on a choisi de se regarder mourir délicieusement il faut poursuivre avec rigueur, et les ordonner, les symboles funèbres' (p. 16). Genet orders and structures the elements around us to construct artificially quintessential signs. His theatre is a liturgy of artifice that worships the cult of mirages. Instead of attempting to smash through the mirrors as Ehrman would suggest, Genet adds more and more mirrors to the hall. Artaud wishes to celebrate the substance of the 'real', whatever that might be - I engage in the definition neither of the word nor of the concept - through the tangible, physical dimension to theatre, the 'bruit de la vie' that will breathe into us the fullness of being³. For Genet non-verbal forms - rhythms, movement, colour, costume, make-up, hair, lighting - are as much a part of codification as verbal language is. Moreover, their visual and physical presence and their absence of innate signification further underscores Genet's concept of the world as artifice. Genet snatches victory from the claws of ontological defeat. He accepts illusion as our life, and celebrates it. He is not apocalyptic, he is not an absurdist. As a fundamental condition for life we need banners and heroes. He metamorphosises this into an affirmation.

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¹ My italics.

² Bettina Knapp, 'Interview with Roger Blin', *Drama Review*, 7, 3 (1963), pp. 111-126.

³ See 'Le Théâtre et les dieux', p. 203.

In my next chapter I expose the mechanisms with which Genet exploits the relativism of the signifier-signified relationship afforded by the absence of essentialist contingent transcendental meaning. Signification is not grounded in any reality except its own self-perpetuating myth. I demonstrate the way in which this freedom allows an atheist actor from Périgueux or even a sugarlump to represent the Pope, or a General's monocle to represent the body of Christ¹. The dual state of belief and disbelief evoked in the spectator by these non-verbal representational substitutes is of the highest theatricality according to Genet. His theatre celebrates the mobility of form, instead of the stultification of transcendence.

¹ See Genet's *Elle*, where the Pope says '[...] j'établis donc que n'importe quel objet pourrait me représenter. [...] Heureusement, dans notre quête, angoissée [...] me vint à l'esprit l'idée d'un bout de sucre!' (p. 73.). He also states that an actor from anywhere in France could take his place (p. 59). And during the photo shoot in *Le Balcon*, the photographer places the General's monocle on the tongue of the Bishop, in the absence of any host with which to take communion in the press photograph (p. 122).

Chapter Three

Duality and Theatricality

Signification is a series of related elements: the referent, the signified and the signifier. By approaching the signifier in the signification process as an end as well as a means Genet is able to give sound, colour and movement as much prominence as he affords the semantic content of words¹. In this way he draws the spectator's attention to the material form of words, objects, colours and gestures, notably to the signifier.

In Genet's last novel, *Journal du Voleur*, he reveals his awareness of the physical dimension to language:

Pour obtenir ici la poésie, c'est-à-dire communiquer au lecteur une émotion que j'ignorais alors - que j'ignore encore - mes mots en appellent à la somptuosité charnelle, à l'apparat des cérémonies d'ici-bas, hélas non à l'ordonnance qu'on voudrait rationnelle, de la nôtre, mais à la beauté des époques mortes et moribondes (p. 189)

Here, Genet makes several points of significance to my study. In this chapter I demonstrate the ways in which by emphasising the signifier, he raises the spectator's awareness of what he calls the material, carnal dimension of the linguistic sign. Saussure's metaphor of a piece of paper, used to illustrate the composition of the sign, is commonly regarded now as misleading, possibly in ways peculiar to semiology itself². The signifier and signified are not equally weighted. Theatre, more than any

¹ I am aware that the Saussurian terms 'signifier' and 'signified' are not wholly appropriate to a study of the non-verbal, for they traditionally pertain to verbal language. Saussure speaks of the metaphysical leap required between the 'image acoustique' and the concept to which the word refers. Hjelmslev's notion of the dialectical relationship between the planes of 'expression' and 'content' within the signifying system could be more apt because it applies to any system, whatever the material: images, words, figures, etc. But Hjelmslev's theory poses a problem, in that he dismisses the speaking and receiving subjects, claiming they pertain solely to the domains of anthropology and psychology. His terms 'expression' and 'content' therefore preclude the performativity of the sign to which I refer in Chapter Four. For this reason I employ the Saussurian terms 'signifier' and 'signified' to refer to form and content. I extend their use to cover form and content in any semiotic system. Saussure is criticised for his binary sign system being a wholly internal relationship between the concept and its acoustic or visual image (see Jean-Paul Resweber, *La Philosophie du langage* (Paris: P.U.F., 1979), p. 29). It operates independently of external reference to an objective reality, creating a rift between the utterance and the object. In a study of Genet this exclusion does not pose a problem, for Genet's world exists solely with respect to internally referential discursivity.

² I employ the term *sign* according to the following definition: 'l'unité du plan de la manifestation, constituée par la fonction sémiotique, c'est-à-dire par la relation de présupposition réciproque qui s'établit entre les grandeurs du plan de l'expression [le signifiant] et du plan du contenu [le signifié]' (A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique : Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (Paris: Hachette, 1979))

other artistic medium perhaps, offers a source of signifiers the materiality of which can be exploited: a hand gesture points to something, and can simultaneously be a balletic movement; a colour pertains to a metaphorical paradigm, and can simultaneously be the appeal of hue and line; a word conveys meaning, and can simultaneously be made of rhythm and sound. In this dissertation I show how rituals and rites - the ‘cérémonies d’ici-bas, [...] la beauté des époques mortes et moribondes’ and theatrical shapes, colours, sounds and movements can thus acquire greater status than that of mere acoustic or visual supports for signification. The physical, ‘carnal’ aspect of performance reclaims its materiality and exists in excess of its purely semantic and thematic dimension. I expose the mechanisms of semiology that Genet exploits in order to enhance the materiality of his non-verbal signs. Like Christ turning bread and wine into flesh and blood, through semiotic alchemy instead of faith Genet transforms scenic elements into both what they are, and what they are not. A General’s monocle is glass and metal, and yet it acts as the host on the tongue of a communicant Bishop. It *is* and is *not* the body of Christ. A male actor is black, and yet he plays a white girl. He *is* and is *not* the white girl. A clock is hastily sketched onto a screen, and yet it chimes. It *is* and is *not* a clock. I demonstrate how this dramatic duality, this ‘énergie’ as Genet expresses it in *Journal du Voleur*, is a source of theatrical experience for the spectator. Moreover, Genet intensifies and exploits this theatricality, transforming it into a display of what is for him a manifestation of some of the essential properties of human identity¹.

I. Baptism and Division

(i) The Virtue of being called a Thief

Genet’s fascination with the rite of the Eucharist is at the origin of all his theatre. In a way similar to Genet’s appropriation and subversion of the existentialist term ‘vide’, to which I alluded in Chapter Two, Genet purloins the sacred religious notion of the Eucharist and exploits it to sacrilegious ends. A brief glance at Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* illustrates the significance of transubstantiation to Genet’s

¹ In this study I employ the word ‘theatricality’ to mean two interrelated concepts. Until now, by theatricality I have meant performativity and self-conscious falsity. This term also alludes to the theatrical experience enjoyed by the spectator.

works and its impact on his use of the non-verbal in theatre. In his biography of Genet, Edmund White warns that supposedly autobiographical details in Genet's works must be treated with suspicion¹. He also suggests that in *Saint Genet* Sartre includes inaccuracies convenient to his own argument. Whether information regarding Genet's childhood is fact or fiction, it is useful material with which to discuss the socialised individual in the world, and Genet's representation of that individual. Sartre illustrates the way in which events from Genet's childhood contribute towards the latter's perception of the image as unstable and shifting. Although Genet's biography and the semiological relationship of the signifier and signified in the construction of the image might at first appear to be very different areas, I draw them together in order to illustrate the manner in which Genet emphasises the role of the signifier in signification, this in turn explaining his sustained interest in the materiality of the sign.

In an interview published in the *Magazine littéraire* Genet speaks with poignancy about his early days as a ward of the state:

le maître d'école avait demandé d'écrire une petite rédaction, chaque élève devant décrire sa maison, j'ai fait la description de ma maison; il s'est trouvé que ma maison était, selon le maître, la plus jolie. Il l'a lue à haute voix et tout le monde s'est moqué de moi en disant: 'Mais, c'est pas sa maison, c'est un enfant trouvé', et alors il y a eu un tel vide, un tel abaissement.²

Without the mandatory signifiers - birth parents and family heritage - Genet did not exist. He was nothing - a 'vide'. In this scene existence is the sum of its parts. In *Saint Genet* Sartre inverts Denis de Rougemont's quotation about Dom Juan, that '[Dom Juan] n'est pas assez pour avoir', to state that Genet 'n'a pas assez pour être.'³ In this respect Sartre's critique coincides with Genet's philosophy. Genet has nothing, and therefore is nobody. But then, according to Sartre's account of Genet's biography, suddenly Genet's overwhelming emptiness is calmed by the unfavourable opinion of others incarnated in the single word 'voleur'. The boy Genet is accused of being a thief at the age of ten. For Sartre, between the internal fact of a hungry boy taking biscuits from his adoptive family's larder and the external appearance of being labelled a thief, there is no point of contact. According to his *Saint Genet* existential nausea and anguish

¹ Edmund White, *Genet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

² 'Par lui-même', p. 26.

³ Denis de Rougemont, *L'Amour et l'occident* (Paris: Plon, 1972), p. 229, and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr, Oeuvres Complètes de Jean Genet*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), I, p. 522.

consume Genet when knowing is separated from being. Sartre illustrates his own existentialist ontological conundrum exposed in *L'Être et le Néant* by recalling Genet's first encounter with the powers of the word. He quotes *Journal du voleur*:

A chaque accusation portée contre moi, fût-elle injuste, du fond du coeur je répondrai oui. A peine avais-je prononcé ce mot - ou la phrase qui le signifiait - en moi-même je sentais le besoin de devenir ce qu'on m'avait accusé d'être (p. 198).

Whether or not Genet the gang boy had actually committed theft, being labelled a thief made him a thief to Sartre's mind. And so Genet became a thief. This accusation provoked much more than a sense of injustice and exclusion in Genet. From it stems his whole response to representation, a response that does not necessarily coincide with that inferred by Sartre. Given that for Genet human identity is discursively constructed, Sartre's phenomenological being, the *en-soi*, and his knowing, the *pour-soi*, are an inaccurate opposition. As far as Sartre is concerned there is a conflict between Genet's perception of himself and that imposed by others. But Genet's dichotomy of the image and the *vide* is not conflictual. It is purely metaphorical, as I have stressed. From his heart Genet will answer 'yes' to any image thrust upon him, because in symbolic terms his heart 'knows' that this is the only ticket he can buy out of the *vide* and into existence. Perversely Genet emerges from the school-day shadows of non-recognition finally to be afforded a position by society: that of thief. Genet's characters follow the same externally imposed destiny as he does. His Blacks say 'nous sommes ce qu'on veut que nous soyons, nous le serons donc jusqu'au bout, absurdement' (p. 122). Conflict in terms of Genetian existence is thus not between the *en-soi* and the *pour-soi*, the internal and the external self. It is the wholly theatrical dynamic between the *vide* and the *féerie*. Human identity is not in transcendental being, as I established in Chapter Two. Nor is it in Sartrean action and consciousness. For Genet it is solely in appearing.

From these episodes in his childhood Genet learns the virtue of the name, of form, of artifice and appearance. He crams the theatrical space with all the objects and sounds that theatrical materiality has to offer - rhythms, noises, shapes, colours, hats, false noses and chins... - as a response perhaps to his own desperate symbolic pursuit of identity. He concurrently becomes aware of the instability of our representational sign system, an instability that he turns to his own end. A little boy being called a thief illustrates the dislocation between Genet's image of himself and the image he receives

from others. Dislocation is not between an inherent reality and its representation. It is between one image - Genet as a thief - and another image - a little boy who welcomes the accusation. Like the object that was named 'Genet', everything *is* what it is called.

For Genet the instability of the signifier-signified relationship and the incongruity of opposing signs signifying the same entity is to be celebrated. It is the enfranchised opportunity for reconfiguration. It is the occasion upon which to juxtapose opposites in order to arouse a theatrical thrill in the spectator. Genet transforms the haunting sense of imperfection and the implicit absence of essence into an affirmation, into the basis for his dramaturgy.

(ii) *Baptism: Appearance or Disappearance?*

Baptism enables the socialised individual to exist. I have established that for Genet naming produces identity. A name constitutes a role and a position within society. Baptism for some is conceived as the division of the 'individual' that results in a haunting sense of alienation. For Genet however the name, the sign and the role are his only salvation. The sign does not alienate the self, it constructs the self. Division is the positive site of mobility and high theatricality.

Symbolic representation involves a succession of dislocations. The world is dislocated from our inherited perception of the world by the referent; the referent is dislocated from its semantic conversion into the signified; the signified is dislocated from the material support for meaning, whether acoustic or visual: the signifier. The idea that the substituting nature of the representational sign might leave a sense of vacuity is discussed often by writers. For Hélène Cixous 'le Logos ouvre sa grande gueule, et nous avale'¹. For Julia Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* the substitution of the subject by the sign leads to 'une existence déchue'². She introduces the 'dedans/dehors' fissuring of the individual into the subject and its objectivisation in language³. And in his *Leçon inaugurale* Roland Barthes describes how he watches himself disappear as the image of Roland Barthes on the page takes shape: 'Je ne puis m'écrire. Quel est ce moi qui s'écrirait? Au fur et à mesure qu'il entrerait dans l'écriture,

¹ Hélène Cixous, *Entre l'écriture* (Paris: Des femmes, 1983), p.24.

² Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 17.

³ *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, p. 76.

l'écriture le dégonflerait, le rendrait vain ; il se produirait une dégradation progressive'¹. For Barthes the substitutional quality of language leads to the vanishing of the represented subject². Between his concept of himself and its representation on the page there is an irreconcilable discrepancy. Barthes writes 'par sa structure même, la langue implique une relation fatale d'aliénation.'³ All three theoreticians dwell upon this sense of a split, even if their complexes ultimately result in a positive degradation of the doxa of representation, Cixous for example effecting a feminist reappropriation of the Logos. Genet is haunted by no such dreads and fears. Instead of negating human identity, the image actually creates it. In contrast with what Cixous proposes, Genet is not swallowed by the gaping mouth of representation; he is spat out and allowed up for air. In opposition to Kristeva's position, baptism blesses Genet with an existence instead of 'depriving' him of one. As I insist, there are no oppositions in Genet's cosmogony, between a 'dedans' and 'dehors', a subject and object, a thing and its representation. The world exists exclusively in terms of the *féerie* - society's inherited mythologies. Through the language that labels Genet a thief, Genet appears instead of undergoing a Bartsian 'disappearance'. Genet does not view the succession of dislocations implicit in representation in terms of an alienation of the subject from its objectivised representation, and nor for that matter do the other three authors with whom I juxtapose him. The difference between him and the other three however lies in the fact that Genet would never distinguish between the individual and its representation, even if this were with the future intention of refuting the opposition.

Genet integrates successive dislocations into his work, beating the contradiction inherent in representation at its own game. Baptism for Genet accords a mobility that allows for the celebration of reconfiguration.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Leçon* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 11.

² Also see Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 1977, *Oeuvres complètes*, (Paris: Seuil, 1995), II, p. 548.

³ *Leçon*, p. 13.

(iii) *Division and Reconfiguration of the Sign*

When Genet is asked to define truth, he says ‘avant tout, c'est un mot.’¹ No word possesses transcendental meaning. No referent-signified-signifier correspondence is sacred. Roman Jakobson in his *Essais de linguistique générale* speaks of signification in terms of a ‘champ de référence’². All signification is relative and is subject to contextual interpretation.

Roland Barthes, amongst numerous writers, suggests repeatedly that the relationship between the three components of the sign system is based on myth and not on transcendence: ‘La dénotation serait un mythe scientifique : celui d'un état “vrai” du langage comme si toute phrase avait en elle un *étymon* (origine et vérité).’³ Origin, truth and Aristotelian phenomena and common beliefs do not ground transcendental denotative signification. If, as can be inferred from Barthes, the signifier and signified are not mutually answerable to each other, they must be at liberty to choose their respective bedfellows. All Genet’s theatrical signs - not only his words, but also his sounds, colours, gestures, props - refuse essential signification. They roam at ease around the Jakobsonian field of reference.

I refer briefly to Judith Butler’s critique of Lacanian semiology in order to introduce her concept of the reconfiguration of the signifier, a concept that proves most useful in my study of the material signifier in Genet’s theatre. It might appear incoherent to draw together Butler’s psycho-analytical critique of Lacan and Genet’s theatre of the non-verbal, but Butler’s argument is central to my study for two reasons. Firstly, she underscores the total freedom for reconfiguration implicit in the relationship of the signifier to the signified. Secondly, she highlights the performativity implicit in reconfiguration. I translate her allusions to performativity into a reading of Genet’s use of theatricality in order to discuss the manner in which Genet draws the spectator’s attention to the self-conscious artifice of the signifier.

With regard to the signifier-signified association, Judith Butler highlights a fundamental contradiction in Lacanian thinking. On the one hand Lacan claims that the signifier’s answerability to the signified is wholly illusory. On the other, he elects the

¹ ‘Par lui-même’, p. 32.

² Roman Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), pp. 213-214.

³ Barthes’s italics, *Roland Barthes*, p. 146.

phallus as the original site of meaning¹. Butler calls into question this ostensibly originating and controlling power of the Lacanian phallus: 'Are we to accept the priority of the phallus without questioning the narcissistic investment by which an organ, a body part, has been elevated/erected to the structuring and centring principle of the world?'². Butler's answer is of course no. She indicates the paradox implicit in the Lacanian thesis: 'To claim for the phallus the status of a privileged signifier performatively produces and effects this privilege. The announcement of that privileged signifier is its performance' (p. 83). Representation takes place on a permanently unstable site where the Lacanian phallus, like all other symbols, is located in what Jakobson describes as the field of reference, or what Genet's characters in *Le Balcon* refer to as the *champ clos*. A performative act - social and cultural praxis - has 'erected' the phallus as the primary signifier in the Lacanian symbolic order. Another performative act can therefore dismantle the phallus. Butler critically counters compulsory heterosexuality at the level of the symbolic. More far-reaching, *all* morphology is thrown into the non-mandatory arena of performativity. Butler not only opens up the possibility for the non gender-specific resignification of the Lacanian primary signifier, but for the reconfiguration of all signifiers. Social and contextual performativity determine the status of any sign.

If a phallus can be lesbian, if a little boy can be a thief, then in Genet's poetic any signifier can represent any signified. A plurality of material, non-verbal signifiers can now signify. The material earns its rightful place in representational codification. One of Genet's interviewers relates a characteristically provocative remark the writer once made about the relationship between theft and poetry: 'C'est un déplacement d'objets.'³ Genet takes any object at his disposal, moves it onto his stage, and breathes meaning into it⁴: a General's monocle becomes the body of Christ; a black man becomes a white woman; a painted screen becomes a clock; a sugarlump becomes the Pope. Set, props, colour, gestures, vocal rhythms, lighting all have reviewed and renewed codified

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 498.

² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 79.

³ Jean Genet, quoted by Arnaud Malgorn, p. 56.

⁴ In an interview with the *Magazine littéraire* Genet says 'le rôle de l'écrivain est d'insuffler une valeur aux mots' (174, (June 1981), p. 21). Genet accords whatever signification he so desires to words, and also to objects and movements, as I illustrate in Part Two of this dissertation.

meaning conferred upon them. The material is given a role on Genet's cast list, in order to create total theatre¹.

Genet shows no interest in narrowing the rift between signifier and signified. On the contrary, the dislocation implicit in representation enables reconfiguration and activation of all words and objects, including the non-verbal, which Genet exploits fully. Systematic poetic reconfiguration of any signifier is the driving dynamic behind Genet's literary oeuvre. But Genet's theatre thrives on transubstantiation as opposed to substitution. When Genet's objects are reconfigured, they do not forsake their habitual signification in order to hide behind a new one. Instead, the identities of Genet's characters, objects, stories and places exhibit an interplay between a multiplicity of simultaneously co-existing, and constantly shifting meanings embodied in colours, gestures, cries and movements, ricocheting back and forth. Rather than being a chameleon that is only ever one colour at any given moment, signification on Genet's stage is a zebra, that is simultaneously black with white stripes, and white with black. By adding layers of meaning that exist simultaneously, Genet heightens the spectator's theatrical experience, and concurrently highlights the self-conscious performativity of meaning production, as I expose.

II. Reconfiguration and Theatricality

(i) The co-presence of opposites

Genet's system of representation is based on multiplication and transubstantiation, not subtraction or substitution. Genet does not replace the holy wafer fully with the monocle, or the black actor fully with the white girl. Instead, the two opposites co-exist on stage. The contradictory conflict between the two appearances is for Genet a source of high theatricality.

Genet pushes representational relativism to its extreme, and in turn underscores the non-sacred relationship of the signifier to the signified. 'Tout acte a [...] une

¹ 'Total theatre' is Ionesco's term for a theatre where each and every scenic element carries signification. Luis Prieto distinguishes intentional signs from non-intentional signs. The former are 'signals', which are essential for the communication of meaning, and the latter are 'indices', which are accessory to comprehension. Both can be verbal and non-verbal. (Luis Prieto, *Messages et signaux* (Paris: P.U.F, 1972)). Total theatre is made up purely of signals.

signification et la signification inverse', he writes with reference to the liberated use of the signifier and signified in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*¹. But, as I have stressed throughout this dissertation, Genet is no iconoclast. In his *Playboy* interview he provides a definition of his poetry: 'la poésie consistait pour moi à transformer, par le truchement du langage, une matière réputée vile en ce qui était considéré comme un matériau noble' (p. 21). Genet feels free to transform noble into vile, good into evil. However, just as Butler subjects the phallus to a process of lesbian reconfiguration as opposed to abolishing it, Genet does not remove maxims. Noble and vile still exist in Genet's poetic. He does not abolish the polarity of binary categories. In Laura Oswald's opinion Genet blurs opposites in his theatre, but I disagree². Genet's combination of opposites is an affirmation of Manichaeism. The maid in *Les Bonnes* who preens her rubber gloves like the feathers of a fan, or the beggar in *Les Paravents* who plays the flute with the air from his mucus-filled nostrils, or Jojo, Roland, Nestor and Roger in the same play who pay a flatulent final tribute to their dying Lieutenant, could all be perceived as attempts by Genet to deconstruct the dyadic oppositions between ugly and aesthetic, good and evil, 'vile' and 'noble'. But to my mind Genet simultaneously undermines the closure of sacred doxa and endorses this closure, by paying lip service to it. Genet himself alludes to this dynamic in 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes':

C'est seulement ces sortes de vérités, celles qui ne sont pas démontrables et même qui sont '*fausses*', celles que l'on ne peut conduire sans absurdité jusqu'à leur extrémité sans aller à la négation d'elles et de soi, c'est celles-là qui doivent être exaltés par l'oeuvre d'art.³

Genet both affirms and denies his heritage. Aristotelian phenomena and common beliefs underscore their own falsity by asserting their infallibility. Genet accepts the traditional epistemological categories out of which our lives are constructed - good and evil, master and servant, black and white - but simultaneously erases them by exposing their non-sacred performativity. They are consequently both present, and absent. He abolishes nothing on his stage, and removes nothing. On the contrary the unstable

¹ Jean Genet, 'Une lecture des Frères Karamazov', *La Nouvelle revue française*, 401(1 October 1986), p. 70.

² *Jean Genet and the Semiotics of Performance*, p. 136.

³ Genet's italics, Jean Genet, 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt déchiré en petits carrés bien réguliers, et foutu aux chiottes', in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) IV, p. 21.

make-up of the signifier and its relation to the signified enables him like a magpie to commit 'un vol avec effraction', to hoard all the contradictions that society has to offer, and to feed them to his theatrical creation¹.

So, Genet allows opposites simultaneously to co-exist on his stage. In *Le Funambule* the costume of Genet's protégé is to be 'à la fois chaste et provocant' (p. 22). This dual state of co-presence is of the highest theatricality according to Genet. Instead of what Oswald believes to be blurring, Genet effects an oscillation between opposites. To baptise something with a sign that does not conventionally represent it effects a dual state of belief and disbelief. The General's monocle is named a holy wafer. It is a monocle, *and* the body of Christ. This dual state of belief and disbelief arouses in the spectator a theatrical thrill.

(ii) Co-presence and Theatricality

Genet creates a style of theatrical performance which exposes duality at the origin of mimesis. Signification in his theatre adds instead of replacing. Theatricality lies not in the symbol itself, but in dividing the symbol into signification and materiality in order to produce a state of duality. As I illustrate in Part Two of my dissertation the use of the material non-verbal signifier is central to the realisation of this dual state.

Butler describes the way in which her lesbian investment in the phallus generates an ontological duality:

When the phallus is lesbian, then it is and is not a masculine figure of power; [...] the phallus (re)produces the spectre of the penis only to enact its vanishing, to reiterate and exploit its perpetual vanishing as the very occasion of the phallus (p. 89).

Not denying the performativity of her act, Butler elects the lesbian phallus as the centre of her symbolic. The sign of the phallus is now simultaneously an acceptance of the Lacanian symbolic, and the negation through feminine reconfiguration of its masculine investment. The constant vanishing and reappearing means that the signifier *is* and at the same time *is not* the Lacanian phallus. Genet exploits a similar potential for duality in theatre. For this reason Butler's theory of the lesbian phallus is pertinent to my study. Genet achieves duality by drawing attention to the signifier - acoustic and visual materiality - in addition to the signified.

¹ Sartre's words, *Saint Genet*, p. 575.

Genet's theatre is based on the principle of transvestism, this transvestism finding its origins in the Catholic rite of transubstantiation. In a letter to Jean-Jacques Pauvert Genet exposes this preoccupation with the Eucharist (pp. 14-15). Just as the priest is simultaneously conscious that the host he places on the communicant's tongue is a piece of bread *and* the body of Christ, so the audience in Genet's theatre is reminded constantly of the dual properties Genet accords signs on his stage. The Eucharist is ceremony, not masquerade. It is transubstantiation and not merely transformation. This is a distinction that Genet insists is fundamental to his theatre. In his 'Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert' he criticises Western theatrical naturalism: '*même les très belles pièces occidentales ont un air de chienlit, de mascarades, non de cérémonies*' (p. 12)¹. When the voluntary suspension of disbelief is near total, for example in the case of naturalist theatre, dramatic experience for the spectator's part is negligible. In contrast, when aestheticism is total, disbelief is total. The complete dramatic experience is derived from the simultaneity of belief and disbelief afforded by self-conscious ceremony. In Genet's opinion no theatrical experience would be derived from a young exotic female actor masquerading as a Spanish señorita, Madame Butterfly or a Japanese geisha. But when these parts are played by the three burly moustachioed administrators of the penal colony in *Le Bagne*, the signifier - three men - is not concealed behind the signified - three women. 'Ce qui me paraît important,' says the photographer in *Elle*, 'c'est de montrer le truquage du cérémonial à cause de la présence [...] de qui sait quoi dans le socle creux ou le nez - creux - d'une vierge du Xv^e' (p. 19). The audience concurrently believes that the actors in *Le Bagne* are brutish males and seductive temptresses, or that Diouf in *Les Nègres* is a black man and a white woman². Like a transvestite, the signified is 'dressed up' by the signifier to look like what it is not. The co-presence of the believable and the unbelievable is the very nature of

¹ Genet's italics.

² This scene is a clear reference to Genet's letter to Antoine Bourseiller:

Toute représentation théâtrale, tout spectacle est une féerie. La féerie dont je parle n'a pas besoin de miroirs, d'étoffes somptueuses, de meubles baroques [...] elle est quand un acteur de Noh, chauffeur de taxi costaud, se grime devant le public, prend l'éventail d'une certaine façon (fausse) fait tomber ses épaules en avant et devient avec une évidence qui donne la chaire de poule, la première shintoïste. (Jean Genet, *Lettre à Antoine Bourseiller*, quoted by J.B. Moraly, *Claudiel le fou, Genet le sage, Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 4, (1988), p. 322.)

Theatricality is heightened by adding supplementary layers of significations instead of replacing them.

ceremony. Genet creates this ceremony on stage by drawing attention, through self-consciously unexpected associations, to the non-verbal signifiers he employs to represent his signifieds.

The following quotation from *L'Enfant criminel* encapsulates Genet's aesthetic of the duality of the image:

‘Monsieur Genet, me dit-il, l'Administration m'oblige à leur enlever ces couteaux. J'obéis donc. Mais regardez-les. Voulez-vous me dire qu'ils sont dangereux? Ils sont en fer blanc. En fer blanc! Avec ça, on ne peut pas tuer quelqu'un.’ Ignorait-il qu'en s'écartant davantage de sa destination pratique, l'objet se transforme, qu'il devient un symbole? Sa forme même change parfois. On dit qu'il s'est *stylisé*. C'est alors qu'il agit sourdement, dans l'âme des enfants il accomplit de plus terribles ravages.¹

The head of the correction centre for young offenders derides the boys, for he discovers that their weapons are made only of tin, and are therefore harmless. But for Genet the director has missed the point entirely. In ‘the souls of the children’ the terrible image of what the knives represent symbolically can cause formidable destruction. The secret to the power invested in the knives is in their ‘stylisation’. Stylisation transforms the knives from useless pieces of tin into weapons of destruction. ‘La réalité du Cirque tient dans cette métamorphose de la poussière en poudre d'or’, writes Genet in *Le Funambule* (p. 17). Stylisation of sound and movement - rhythms, roles, colours, gestures and shapes - is the alchemy that allows dust to represent gold in *Le Funambule*, Jean to represent a millionaire's daughter in *Splendid's*, actors' voices to represent the fauna and flora of an African forest in *Les Nègres*... For the purposes of this dissertation, the term stylisation defines Genet's arrangement of the signifier that draws attention to the materiality of that signifier. His stylisation dislocates the signifier from the signified, effecting a duality that in turn leads to theatricality, as I explain.

(iii) Theatre: The Ultimate Site of Duality and Theatricality

In my opening quotation from *Journal du Voleur* Genet expresses the ‘émotion’ derived from the overt presence of the ‘carnal’, material dimension to language. I have illustrated how an investment in the signifier gives rise to a dual state of disbelief and suspension of disbelief. Theatre in its very conception is the site of belief and disbelief, as I explain. Genet stylises signs on his stage, enhancing the presence of the signifier

¹ My italics, Jean Genet, *L'Enfant criminel* (Décines: Marc Barbezat L'arbalète, 1958), p. 49.

and in turn exaggerating this inherent characteristic of theatre, to create the ‘bonheur de l’équivoque’ and to evoke an ‘émotion’ in the spectator¹.

At a literal level theatre, like all art, simultaneously is, and is not. Even in the case of the most naturalist play where the scenic representation attempts as close and precise a copy of everyday life as possible, the audience is not duped. It is conscious that what unfolds on stage is an illusion created by mimesis, and not a slice of life peered at through a transparent fourth wall. However, for Anne Ubersfeld in her study of the performative relationship between the theatre and the spectator, *Lire le théâtre*, what differentiates theatrical performance radically from all other art forms is that representation in theatre is artistic illusion, and yet it is real and concrete. The actor’s body and voice and the props are not artistic creations on a page, on canvas or on celluloid. They are human flesh and blood and real objects. The stage is *hic et nunc*. The theatre is the incarnation of fiction in the real world. And yet these men, women and objects differ from those this side of the proscenium arch, for convention deems that we may not touch them or move them, and we may not answer back. They do not exactly have an existence equivalent to real objects and people. Nor does the receiver of the dramatic message, the audience, hold the same status as the receiver of an utterance outside the theatre. The audience is gagged and muted by convention, unable to modify the proceedings on stage. Concurrently, the men and women on stage are forbidden to speak unless it be as mouthpieces, repeating the lines of the author. There is no veritable exchange of dialogue. In *Le Spectacle du discours* Michael Issacharoff’s pragmatic study of the spectator-theatrical text relationship, he states that a quasi-dialogue is addressed to a multiple quasi-receiver: actors on the stage, and spectators in the audience².

Ubersfeld sheds light on the paradox on which all theatrical performance is founded. The spectator is conscious of the fact that the message received during the play is ‘non réel ou plus exactement non vrai’ (p. 42). As opposed to being quite simply ‘false’, the message in Ubersfeld’s words, is *non vrai*, the difference being slight, but significant. Whereas false is the binary opposition of true, ‘not true’ negates and at the same time incorporates ‘true’. The very conception of theatre depends on the

¹ *Journal du Voleur*, p. 34.

² Michael Issacharoff, *Le Spectacle du discours* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1985), p. 29.

simultaneity of the illusion of total presence, and its negation. Instead of concealing the falsity - the *non vrai* of the theatrical illusion - Genet simultaneously makes the audience believe in his creation, and underlines the artifice of this creation. Again, instead of blurring opposites, he promotes co-existence. He underscores the co-presence of the *vrai* and the *non vrai* that enables theatricality.

In my last chapter I illustrated the way in which Genet reveals our identity to be discursive artifice. Here I demonstrate how this artifice is neither single nor unified. It is the interplay of multiple and successive images. The theatre is the site par excellence of the multiple sign. All scenic elements find their foundations both in the true and the not true. They have referentiality external to the play, and signification that Genet affords them within the play. The theatre is therefore the embodiment of plurality not only because of the multiplicity of media at the disposal of the playwright, but also because signs on stage can possess multiple significations. Genet exploits this potential to its maximum. He creates multiple presence through stylisation. In the same way that the children in the remand centre stylise their tin knives and transform them into lethal weapons, through aesthetic alchemy Genet arranges the wealth of theatrical objects, gestures and sounds at his disposal, to fissure them into both being what they are, and to negate their existence by underscoring their artifice. Through Genet's stylisation of the signifier the spectator is seduced by the proceedings on stage into believing in Genet's truth, and yet he/she is reminded constantly that this truth is not true. Genet comments on the very make-up of our existence, which is a falsity, a *féerie* of artifice, that is at the same time a truth, for it is the only true existence we will ever recognise. Again, Genet appropriates a term, in this case 'false', and subverts it so that it concurrently holds its conventional meaning, and the opposite meaning, namely truth¹. This relentless belief and disbelief, concealing and revealing, is effected on stage through the use of what can be termed *Verfremdungseffekte*.

¹ Although I find the term 'not true' preferable to the word 'false' for reasons that I explain with reference to Ubersfeld, I nonetheless sometimes employ 'false', with emphasis more on its notion of artifice rather than on its negativity. Genet himself states in *Le Balcon* that truth is born out of 'falsity' (p. 22).

(iv) *Verfremdungseffekte and Sacredness in Theatre*

The term *Verfremdungseffekt* is of service to my study, for it refers to the self-conscious theatricality of the sign that draws attention not only to its own falsity, but to the falsity of all the signs that constitute our existence.

In her article entitled 'Brecht's Epic Theatre and the French Stage', Edith Kern traces the origins of the term *Verfremdungseffekt*¹. This Russian device was first employed with the intent to de-emotionalise in order to make apparent and overt the structural specificity of an art form. In the context of theatre *Verfremdungseffekte* lay bare the plumbing of theatrical production. Genet dreams of an artistic work that 'se déferait à mesure qu'elle se poursuivrait'². Genet's drama is an illusion that simultaneously succeeds, and destroys its own success by indicating its artificiality. *Verfremdungseffekte* chip away at the glossy layer that lies over automatic responses. Far from concealing the mechanisms of production, Genet capitalises on them. Self-conscious stylisation of speech and gesture reveals theatricality. In *Métathéâtre et intertexte - aspects du théâtre dans le théâtre* Manfred Schmeling distinguishes between the two distinct concepts of theatre-*within*-the-theatre and theatre-*on*-the-theatre³. Dramatic unity within the main body of the play is the prerequisite for theatre-*within*-the-theatre. Schmeling defines it as 'un élément intercalé dans un drame, qui dispose de son espace scénique propre et de sa propre chronologie - de telle façon qu'il s'établit une simultanéité spatiale et temporelle de la sphère scénique et dramaturgique' (pp. 7-8). As I have explained, Genet fissures signifiers so that they simultaneously represent more than one thing. Both significations exist within the same time-space framework. Theatre-*within*-the-theatre is thus not an entirely appropriate term to apply to Genet's theatre. Schmeling sees the term theatre-*on*-the-theatre, or metatheatre as more applicable to modern plays. As opposed to theatre-*within*-the-theatre which is quite simply one tale set within another, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for example, metatheatre is a hermeneutic comment or critique on the conditions of theatrical production and reception. In his 'Lettres à Jean-Jacques Pauvert' Genet writes 'je

¹ See Edith Kern, 'Brecht's Epic Theatre and the French Stage', *Symposium*, 16 (1962), pp. 28-35.

² Jean Genet, 'Fragments', *Temps modernes*, 104 (August 1954), p. 200.

³ Manfred Schmeling, *Métathéâtre et intertexte - aspects du théâtre dans le théâtre* (Paris: Lettres modernes, 1982), p. 6.

tâcherai d'obtenir un décalage qui, permettant un ton déclamatoire, porterait le théâtre sur le théâtre' (p. 13). Whilst in naturalist theatre by some hidden and mysterious process of identification and union the public readily projects itself into what appears to be its own reflection, Genet's theatre lays bare the mechanisms of projection and vicarious satisfaction which underline theatrical make-believe.

Stylisation highlights the material signifier, that would otherwise just carry the signified and pass unnoticed. Genet's *Verfremdungseffekte*, the duality of multiple layers of illusion, solicits the spectator's belief and simultaneously obstructs it. I began this chapter by demonstrating how the signifier-signified relationship is not sacred. Genet seduces the spectator into believing in his reconfigured theatrical colours, gestures and sounds, in spite of their artificiality. The religious faith necessary in order to accept the Host as the body of Christ is replaced by the presence and immediacy of aesthetic efficiency. 'Sans doute une des fonctions de l'art, est-elle de substituer à la foi religieuse l'efficacité de la beauté', writes Genet in 'Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert' (p. 15). Beauty is efficient for Genet because it creates a fatal attraction to artifice, and yet underscores this artifice as 'not true'. Genet's plays become sacred myths, subversive latter-day communions that reveal the theatricality of sacredness and belief.

This sacredness and the simultaneous awareness of its performative theatricality result in a heightened theatrical experience for the spectator's part. They also result in a metatheatrical comment on the falsity not only of Genet's productions, of his theatre-on-the-theatre, but also of the spectators' lives.

III. Theatricality and Life Off-Stage

Edith Kern explains that *Verfremdungseffekt* is translated from the Russian Formalist term *priem ostrannenija*, literally meaning 'effects for making strange'. She goes on to state that this translation not only incorporates the concept of self-conscious theatricality, but also points to an intentional unnerving of the audience for the playwright's part. Kern writes 'the function of the image [...] lies not in bringing closer to us the familiar, but, on the contrary, in "making strange" the habitual by presenting it

in a novel light'¹. I show how the non-verbal *Verfremdungseffekte* that I discuss in detail in Part Two of this dissertation - the unexpected disunity of theme, fragmentation of character, tone and rhythm, and clashing acting styles, costume, make-up and set - underscore the trickery and artifice both of Genet's theatre, and of our lives.

(i) Verfremdungseffekte and Malaise

Through his dynamic, virulent and attacking theatre, Genet wishes to 'établir une espèce de malaise dans la salle...' ². In his *Lettres à Roger Blin* he writes 'vraiment, il faudrait qu'à la sortie, les spectateurs emportent dans leur bouche ce fameux goût de cendre et une odeur de pourri' (p. 16). This is echoed in his 'Avertissement' for *Le Balcon* where he writes 'que le mal sur la scène explose, nous montre nus, nous laisse hagards s'il se peut et n'ayant de recours qu'en nous.' ³ The theatre must reveal to the spectators a truth about their lives, a truth that they might prefer to overlook. The anodyne should be replaced with the cruel, harsh, blatant truth about our existence.

In the case of Brecht's Epische Theater, where the term *Verfremdungseffekt* was first employed in Germany, the new format is intended to create sufficient distance for the spectator's political objectivity to be activated. In the context of the Epische Theater *Verfremdungseffekte* are 'distancing effects'. Far from being distanced from the theatrical spectacle, in Genet's theatre the spectator is actually involved in drawing parallels between the shifting levels of illusion on stage, and those in his or her own life. In his introduction to *Les Bonnes* Genet shows his intention to stage an essential truth about human existence:

je vais au théâtre afin de me voir, sur la scène (restitué en un seul personnage ou à l'aide d'un personnage multiple et sous forme de conte) tel que je ne saurais - ou n'oserais - me voir ou me rêver, et tel pourtant que je me sais être (p. 10).

A fluctuation between illusion and more illusion is not only highly theatrical, but it also succeeds in communicating Genet's central problem, that of the definition of human identity and of the world we inhabit. By drawing attention to the material, non-verbal signifier through stylisation, Genet not only lays bare the mechanics of theatrical production, but also, by a cunning paradoxical twist exposes the nuts and bolts of our

¹ Pp. 28-35.

² Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*, p. 9.

³ *Avertissement*, in *Les Bonnes*, p.15.

existence. If the proceedings on stage are theatre, then what are the *Verfremdungseffekte* that interrupt this theatre to tell the spectator that 'it's only theatre'? If *Verfremdungseffekte* - an emphasis of the non-verbal materiality of speech, set and gesture through stylisation - are not on the side of the theatrical creation, are they on the side of life off stage? By a process of elimination the spectator must deduce that *Verfremdungseffekte* - stylisation, ceremony, artifice - *are* the only 'real life' we can know. Ubersfeld states that if what is on stage is *non vrai* and yet *vrai*, then the logical conclusion is that life is true and yet not true. For her, drama is real life because real life is drama. In the case of Genet's theatre *Verfremdungseffekte* force the spectators to come to the realisation that their identities and their worlds can exist nowhere else except within discursive form itself, within the *féerie*, the fable of social constructs. The traditional line between life, which is supposedly 'real', and art, which is a representation of that 'real', is erased by Genet's theatrical performance. Self-conscious stylisation of the material in theatre now enables Genet to illustrate his firm belief highlighted in my last chapter, that life thrives on, generates and is generated out of illusion.

The stylisation of the characters' movements and words thus emphasises the fact that not only the actors play roles, but also the characters played by the actors, and for that matter all of us, are compulsive 'transvestites' too. Komac, a black guard at the penal colony in *Le Bagne* asks his colleague Moka what one of the convicts is doing:

KOMAC Et qu'est-ce qu'il fait?

MOKA Semblant.

KOMAC Comme d'habitude. (*un temps*) Et comme tout le monde.

Everyone - the convicts, Genet as a thief, the spectator - plays the roles distributed by society. 'Performance - how people deconstruct/reconstruct their various experiential worlds - interrogates and affects social, political, economic, and ritual activities', writes Richard Schechner on the relationship between performativity on and off stage¹. The quasi-dialogue addressed to a multiple quasi-receiver to which Issaccharoff alludes defines communication both on and off stage. Our every gesture is performed, our every word uttered, in the context of a role we play. The Chief of Police in *Le Balcon* says to

¹ Richard Schechner, 'Comment', *Drama Review*, 30, 1 (1986), pp. 5-7.

Irma's clients: 'Vous n'avez donc jamais accompli un acte pour l'acte lui-même, mais toujours pour que cet acte, accroché à d'autres, fasse un évêque, un juge, un général...' (p. 133). All acts acquire sense only when scripted into roleplay. Anne Ubersfeld tells us that 'la théâtralité fait de l'in-signifiante du monde un ensemble signifiant' (p. 151). We exist via semiotic codes which define our participation in a contract binding meaning to being in discourse. 'Ce qu'il y a de beau sur la terre, c'est aux masques que vous le devez', says the Envoy in *Le Balcon* (p. 111). The mask and roleplay are the mode by which signs attain consistency of meaning and actions acquire stability. I develop this pre-eminence of the non-verbal form of the mask or role over the substance of the message in Chapter Four.

For Saïd's mother in *Les Paravents* the impression she gives the guests at her son's wedding is of paramount importance. In spite of her hunger she refuses to eat a chicken leg from the suitcase of provisions she carries, lest the wedding party concludes that she rears one-legged chickens (p. 21). Genet is keen to point out that we, as members of the audience, are no less led by image. The stalls, balcony and gods of the traditional theatrical establishment are a façade of role-playing as Genet affirms in his *Lettre à Roger Blin*:

pour la poulaille la salle - orchestre, loges, corbeilles - était un premier spectacle, qui formait en somme un écran - ou un prisme - qui devait traverser le regard avant de percevoir le spectacle de la scène (p. 26).

In point of fact, the characters on stage are more honest than the people in the audience, for they admit freely to their theatrical artifice, whereas the stalls, balcony and gods are a spectacle in themselves, a spectacle of who is situated geographically lower but socially higher than whom, and vice versa. The difference between actor and audience is only practical, not fundamental. 'Il y a un endroit au monde où la théâtralité ne cache aucun pouvoir, c'est le théâtre', writes Genet¹. In this respect the theatre is 'truer', more honest than real life, for it has pretensions to be nothing other than play-acting. For this reason Irma refers to her 'maison d'illusions', where men come to simulate their fantasies, as 'la plus *honnête* maison d'illusions' (p. 62)². Through self-conscious performativity on stage Genet exposes the performativity implicit in our socialised

¹ 'Par lui-même', p. 28.

² My italics.

lives. 'Il faudra bien reconnaître un jour que c'est un moraliste' writes Sartre (p. 617). By exposing fiddling, faking and fixing at the heart of his theatre, Genet reveals it as the foundation of our existence. His 'not true' is therefore paradoxically the only truth we can attain. Scott, one of the members of the gang 'la Rafale' in *Splendid's*, says he will only play poker with the other criminals if they all agree to cheat: 'Accepte qu'on trichera et on jouera', he exclaims to Jean. The conversation continues:

JEAN On ne trichera pas.

SCOTT On ne jouera pas (p. 23).

For Scott, playing is tantamount to cheating. For the audience, living is tantamount to playing. Genet's characters are born of image, surface and materiality, and so too are we. *Verfremdungseffekte* do not produce caricatures. They produce characters as stylised as we are. They throw back 'au public une image profonde de lui-même', says Genet¹. He distances us from his theatre, only to integrate us back into it by proving life itself to be theatre. Everyday life is unmasked as play-acting. The world we perceive is traced through the self-conscious *mise-en-scène* of theatrical performance.

(ii) Performance and Mobility

Were each character bound to one single role, Genet would contradict his own negation of transcendental truth and his elevation of plurality. Just as the relationship between the signifier and the signified in language is neither stable nor sacred, nor is that between the individual and the role. We are all bound in discourse, but Genet illustrates the potential for mobility and rhythm within these confines. The interplay of roles on multiple levels replaces monolithic stasis with rhythmical shifting. Genet creates a relentless strobe effect, as characters flicker between a multiplicity of parts. He communicates to the audience through the stylisation of the signifier - tone, stress patterns, register and costume - which are constantly swapped and substituted to denote the characters' shifting from role to role. One minute Jean in *Splendid's* is a gangster, the next he dons an ill-fitting debutante's ball gown and becomes a millionaire's daughter; one minute Diouf in *Les Nègres* is an old black man, the next he puts on a straw-like platinum blond wig and becomes a white virgin; one minute Claire and

¹ 'Comentaires du dixième tableau', *Les Paravents*, p. 119.

Solange in *Les Bonnes* are maids, the next they wrap themselves in curtains and bedspreads and become bourgeois ladies of leisure; one minute Irma in *Le Balcon* is a sado-masochistic pimp, the next her tone is whimpering and she becomes a submissive, jilted lover. Bravo, a gangster from *Splendid's* alludes openly to the constantly shifting roles that constitute his identity as an outlaw. He complains to Jean about life in the gang: 'Pour rester avec vous, tu m'as obligé, moi, le plus tendre, à vivre crispé, à vivre en héros, à vivre en monsieur, à vivre tout seul, à vivre debout, à vivre en colère, et sans broncher' (p. 29). Genet does not allow us to be fooled complacently into thinking that his masters of transvestism on stage possess identities any more unstable than ours. We too change our identities as often as we change our clothes. Members of the audience are pawns on the very same chessboard as characters on Genet's stage are. Human existence is the juxtaposition of an infinity of imprecise, multi-faceted, crazed identities played out within the shifting parameters of discourse.

Our identity comprises roleplay. However, we are not obliged to play one sole role. By modifying the signifier - Jean, Diouf, Claire, Solange, Irma... - Genet succeeds most effectively in conveying the mobility afforded by the constant shifting between roles. This mobility is a cause for celebration. I discuss the antagonistic senses of anxiety and jubilation aroused by the instability of identity in Chapter Four.

IV. Conclusion: Genet, Artaud, Ceremony and Life

Life is a ceremony composed of symbols 'des époques moribondes' - repeated defunct, vacuous rites - as Genet states in the quotation from *Journal du Voleur* that begins this chapter. I return to Artaud in order to conclude this, Part One of my study, and to define Genet's poetics of representation in terms of surface and ceremony, instead of substance that transcends ceremony.

Artaud strives for renewal, regeneration and vivacity. Salvation is possible only on the condition that we are freed from the triviality and prosaism of the quotidian. He has a global plan, and is led to messianic conclusions. Disguising, representation and repetition are commensurate with impoverishment. 'Le théâtre n'est pas un art', says

Artaud¹. With the fulgurous violence of plague, apocalypse and revolt, the profound theory of the 'Théâtre de la cruauté' seeks to halt the perpetual cycle of society's academy of Greco-Roman and Christian fatuous, vapid rituals that are stripped of profound, immutable signification, and to fill the stage with the rhythm and movement of what Artaud sees as 'real life', tapped from the hidden pulse of nature. Genet proves that beyond the repetition of these rituals there is no life. Ceremony is the very *raison d'être* of Genet's theatre because it is the cornerstone of our existence. Our lives, like the proceedings on stage, are *non vrai*. They are a truth that incorporates the falsity of structuring, the 'image vraie née d'un spectacle faux', as Genet puts it². Society and its inhabitants are able to exist in illusion because of the ontological fallacy which grants fallibility to mechanical reproductions. Our notions of the self and of the socialised world are redefined as the imitation of imitation. 'Les images ont une double fonction : montrer et dissimuler', says Genet³. Genet exposes the falsity of structuring to reveal with more force the truth: the ritualistic artifice of both theatre and life. Certain critics describe Genet's theatre as the alternation between image and reality⁴. It is however to my mind illusion fragmented by further illusion. He adds layer upon layer of artifice until the spectator awakens to the realisation that the *réel* is made up of *féerie*. Both Genet and Artaud penetrate realism, but ironically only Genet, by means of Artaud's *bêtes noires* - artifice and ceremony - actually manages to place life on stage as it really is. Artaud writes:

Et l'on pourrait dire que le théâtre a commencé à dégénérer à partir du jour où il a voulu imposer son autonomie, se tailler à côté du réel une sorte de domaine à part qui en accuse l'intolérable artifice. Or le théâtre c'est la *magie du réel*, une issue au trop plein d'une vie qui n'entre pas dans l'existence coutumière, qui fait craquer les cadres de la réalité visible et coutumière.⁵

Artaud seeks to invade the stage with his 'real', whatever this might be. He feels that he can make the invisibility of the 'real' concrete through the materiality of non-verbal forms. Genet abolishes the stage-spectator dichotomy, not to expose the real person

¹ 'Théâtre sacré', p. 286.

² *Le Balcon*, p. 22.

³ Genet, 'Les Palestiniens', article written at the end of the month of May 1971 in Paris, commenting on photographs taken in Palestinian camps by Bruno Barbey, and published in the review *Zoom*, in *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 89.

⁴ See Ehrmann, 'Genet's Dramatic Metamorphosis', pp. 20-42.

⁵ My italics, *Théâtre sacré*, p. 282.

hidden in every actor, but to expose the actor hidden in every real person. Genet was named a thief and spared from non-existence. Performativity within the strict parameters of ceremony gives meaning to life. Artaud calls for spontaneous, unique, improvised acts, 'aussi incapable[s] de se répéter, que n'importe quel acte de la vie.'¹ These acts are not a possibility for Genet. Quasi-acts and quasi-dialogues between quasi-speakers and quasi-receivers are the definition of human communication.

People and objects on Artaud's stage must constitute presence and not imitation. Artaud writes 'ils devront être pris non pas pour ce qu'ils représentent, mais pour ce qu'ils sont en réalité, dans un sens immédiat.'² It is Genet who transcends everyday meaning by exploiting the instability of the signifier-signified relationship in order to subvert the essentialist notion of people and objects 'dans un sens immédiat'. Genet paradoxically offers the possibility of relative redemption that Artaud's theatre makes impossible through its unashamed positivism.

Rebirth in Genet's theatre is attained through the metamorphosis of form, all form, whether verbal or non-verbal. Butler shows how performativity undoes psychic and cultural givens. It empowers us to reconfigure. Reconfiguration liberates the signifier, whether person or thing, from any original site of meaning, and generates mobility within the fixity of discursive boundaries. Reconfiguration allows a plurality of forms, both verbal and non-verbal - rhythm, colour and movement - to signify. Most significantly for the spectator, reconfiguration of the signifier into both what it is and what it is not results in ceremony and not masquerade, affording greater theatrical impact. The plush velvet chair that the photographer arranges for the photo shoot in *Elle* is both the papal throne and a novelty coffee maker. It is and is not a symbol of ecclesiastical eminence. It is and is not a household appliance. Emphasis on form through stylisation of the signifier produces a duality that engenders the theatrical 'émotion' Genet writes about in *Journal du Voleur*. It is the source of great dramatic energy high theatrical excitement.

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¹ 'Théâtre Alfred Jarry. Première année - saison 1926-7', p. 15.

² 'Manifeste pour un théâtre avorté', p. 22.

In the name of inclusion and not exclusion Genet's theatre welcomes a plurality of material forms. This materiality metaphorically represents the surface of structure and form that creates the *féerie*, which itself constructs the *réel* of our identities and world as we recognise them. The attention drawn to the non-verbal - acoustic and visual dramatic effects - in Genet's works self-consciously illustrates the way in which form is codified into the ritualistic performance that constitutes both theatre and life. Owing to the potential for reconfiguration afforded by the unstable relationship of the signifier to the signified, relative mobility to shift meaning from form to form. The potential theatricality derived from revealing this instability is central to my discussion of non-verbal material form in Genet's theatre. With this comprehensive definition of non-verbal form in mind, it now remains for me to analyse closely Genet's use of the material, the acoustic and the visual in theatre.

Part Two

Chapter Four

Polyphony and Ceremony

Like everyone else, his life is so fragmented that each time he sees a connection between two fragments he is tempted to look for a meaning in that connection. The connection exists. But to give it meaning, to look beyond the bare facts of its existence, would be to build an imaginary world inside the real world, and he knows it would not stand.

Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*.¹

In the programme for the 1983 production of *Les Paravents* François Regnault writes:

De tous les jeux les plus beaux sur les mots aux paradoxes les plus étranges de la pensée, voici la pièce qui ne ressemble à aucune.

Des trajectoires s'y croisent - sans se rencontrer, des voix y alternent - sans s'entendre, les cohérences ordinaires de la subjectivité y éclatent, des personnages innombrables, juste le temps de former une image, s'y font et s'y défont, la polyphonie la plus savante ne cesse d'y suivre les respirations.²

In the previous chapter I highlighted the malleability of the sign and the non-sacredness the signifier-signified relationship affords. A sugarlump can represent itself and the Pope in Genet's theatre. In this chapter I describe the way in which Genet adds multiple signification to characters' utterances in order to illustrate how a fragmentary multitude of voices speaks from any one source. Regnault describes these multiple voices as 'polyphonic'. Each voice is the manifestation of a different role, played by the same character. Despite what Regnault suggests, the polyphonic shifting from voice to voice to

¹ Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 147.

² François Regnault, programme for the 1983 production of *Les Paravents* at the Théâtre des Amandiers/Nanterre.

my mind is not exclusive to *Les Paravents*. It resounds across Genet's theatre. Characters alternate between playing a mistress and playing a maid, between playing a black man and playing a white virgin, between playing a pimp and playing a prostitute. This alternation is a multiple statement on form. Firstly the constant shifting draws attention to the signifier, the role played, as opposed to the signified, the content of the utterance the character recites. Genet reveals identity to be the surface, material, exterior mask worn by characters. Character and role become non-verbal signifiers, devoid of substance, namely of character and thematic content. For this reason I choose to incorporate the use of theatrical polyphony into my analysis of Genet's non-verbal. Stylisation of polyphony foregrounds the ceremonies that form the lives of characters and also our lives. 'Flic, c'est lourd à porter', says the Policeman in *Splendid's* (p. 59). All identity involves supporting and playing.

Roles are not however fixed. The constant polyphonic shifting from role to role creates a rhythmic mobility in the theatrical text, and in addition underscores the contradictory fragments which writers from André Gide to Paul Auster point out constitute our identity. Characters' voices are broken mirrors. They refuse to send back one single image, instead reflecting many and showing the subject to derive from multiple sources. At the end of a complex process of transformation Genet exposes both the fallacy and the truth of the 'character'. Unified, integral characters do not exist. They are replaced by the fragmented, disparate, heterogeneous and contradictory characters that 's'y font et s'y défont', in Regnault's words. As Auster warns, to subsume the fragments into an all-encompassing superstructure is fallacious.

Genet redefines the communicative ability of conversation. Regnault describes the isolated characters in *Les Paravents*, whose voices remain unheard. Characters in Genet's theatre exploit the instability of signification in order to interpret others' utterances to their own ends. Their attempts to transcend the constraints of scripted roleplay result in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand they are accorded the relative liberty within the confines of established discursive patterns to play with their utterances and to switch from role to role. On the other this freedom merely serves to isolate them further, for mutual understanding and successful communication between individuals becomes impossible. 'Conversation' is defined as 'an interchange of thoughts and

words’¹. As I demonstrate Genet shows how voices remain unanswered and individuals are isolated eternally from each other.

I analyse closely the Fifth Tableau of *Le Balcon* in order to highlight the polyphonic devices that Genet employs across his theatre. I employ Dominique Maingueneau and Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s theories of polyphony in theatre as tools with which to examine the fissured voices speaking from the characters’ mouths. These two theoreticians state that speech acts are one of the polyphonic voices emanating from an utterance. I thus apply J.L. Austin’s theories on performativity to highlight the perlocutionary effects of an utterance. This analysis of polyphony leads me to discover that Genet’s stylisation of polyphony - his prioritisation of form over content through a sustained manipulation of the signifier, for example when a pimp speaks the words of a judge - allows for highly effective non-verbal expression on stage, the co-presence of multiple roles generating a theatrical ‘thrill’ for the spectator’s part. Finally, as well as the multiple voices produced by characters, I concentrate on multiple reception, incorporating reception by the spectator.

The Extract: Fifth Tableau of Le Balcon²

From the point of view of theatrical effect *Le Balcon* is perhaps Genet’s weakest play. Whereas in his other plays concepts of the poetics of representation and the image are embodied symbolically in the very form of the theatrical event, in *Le Balcon* characters reason their way explicitly and somewhat turgidly through these notions. The second half of the play comprises some dragging, confusing and confused ontological debates. In the words of the *Spectator* magazine, ‘a huge fog of symbolic rhetoric descends with appalling suddenness, producing a steaming muddle.’³ The first five scenes of the play however, the fifth in particular, present both in content and in form an insightful and dramatically effective critique of ceremony, ritual and roleplay on and off stage. For this

¹ Oxford English Dictionary (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1933).

² Genet revised *Le Balcon* over a span of twelve years (see bibliography for different versions). He reacted passionately to the responses of directors, audiences and reviewers, and made significant alterations to the 1956 edition, after his dissatisfaction with the productions staged in Paris, New York and London (see ‘Comment jouer *Le Balcon*’, pp. 7-12). A close analysis of his 1962 modifications constitutes an invaluable source with which to study the development of his perception of roleplay on and off stage. I consequently compare versions of *Le Balcon* during this chapter. Unless otherwise stated, my references are taken from the 1962 version of the play.

³ *The spectator*, 3rd May 1957.

reason I choose the earlier part of the play in order to illustrate Genet's exploitation of polyphony.

Le Grand Balcon is the 'Maison d'illusions' of Madame Irma. In the opening sequences to the play four clients realise their fantasies. They play-act at being a bishop, judge, general and tramp, respectively. The mention of money changing hands and the sado-masochistic flavour of the scenes indicates clearly to the spectator that the four characters are not what they appear. Genet splits the signifiers of bishop, judge, general and tramp in two. The characters are both commonplace individuals and social stereotypes. They are both Crédit Lyonnais clerks, S.N.C.F. employees and plumbers, and the Bishop, Judge and General.

The Fifth Tableau is apparently distinct from these preceding scenes. The two main characters, Madame Irma and her second-in-command the prostitute Carmen, attend to the brothel accounts in the privacy of Irma's boudoir - 'L'Evêque... deux mille... deux mille du Juge...'¹. As they discuss the brothel's takings, they are clearly 'themselves' and not characters in a roleplay. The uniqueness of this tableau lies in the fact that, unlike the clerks and prostitutes who play judges and thieves in the first tableaux, or Claire and Solange who play Madame in *Les Bonnes*, or the Blacks who play Whites in *Les Nègres*, Irma and Carmen are supposedly themselves here. And yet they still continue to slip in and out of roles. They play at being an accountant; they play at being a mother, a friend or a lover. In his 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*' Genet himself stresses the singularity of the Fifth Tableau. In the previous tableaux the audience must be able to discern clearly when the clients speak in their roles of bishop, judge, general or tramp and when they speak as themselves. For example, when the Bishop scowls at Madame Irma for hurrying him - 'Mais laissez-moi nom de Dieu. Foutez le camp! Je m'interroge. *Irma referme la porte*. La majesté, la dignité, illuminant ma personne [...]' (p. 27) - Genet stipulates two distinct tones: the first must be everyday, and the second pompous. He writes '*en somme, aucune équivoque, mais deux tons qui s'opposent*.'² The unequivocal duality of clerk-playing-bishop and factory-worker-playing-general simultaneously seduces the spectator into believing in the roles, and disrupts that belief. The tone of the Fifth Tableau however is to be characterised by a disarming air of

¹ Carmen in *Le Balcon*, p. 54.

² Genet's italics, 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*', p. 8

ambiguity:

*Au contraire, dès la scène entre madame Irma et Carmen, jusqu'à la fin, il s'agit de découvrir un ton de récit toujours équivoque, toujours en porte à faux. Les sentiments des protagonistes, inspirés par la situation, sont-ils feints, sont-ils réels?*¹

The Fifth Tableau constitutes a turning point. The spectator is beset with consternation, as characters shift deftly, deviously and almost indiscernibly from role to role. In another annotation to *Le Balcon* Genet writes 'mes personnages ont tous des masques, comment voulez-vous que je vous dise, s'ils sont vrais ou faux. Moi-même, je n'en sais plus rien.'² Genet accustoms the audience to the idea of roleplay in the first tableaux. He then brings scripted gesture and utterance closer to home. The characters in the Fifth Tableau shift disarmingly from role to role, when they are supposedly 'themselves'. We are prevented from formulating a synthetic psychological profile of them. But are we ourselves any different? By exposing the ritual charade Irma and Carmen play when supposedly themselves, Genet reveals the same masquerades in the lives of the spectators. Not only the clients, but everyone plays parts on the world's stage.

I. A Definition of Polyphony

(i) The tripartite utterance

In the Fifth Tableau of *Le Balcon* Carmen explains her suffering to Irma: 'Enfin, je songe à ma fille et alors j'ai le hoquet' (p. 57). As well as meaning 'hiccoughs' or 'sobs of despair', *hoquet*, which features only in the second version of the play, can be defined as the alternation between two voices in mediaeval polyphonic singing. This reference to polyphony is either an uncanny and most convenient coincidence, or else a deliberate pun for Genet's part. Genet's intentions aside, *le hoquet* highlights the co-presence of voices that is implicit in speaking.

I begin by identifying the terminology of polyphony employed in this analysis. In his study of performativity and literature Dominique Maingueneau highlights the following consequence of polyphony: 'la problématique polyphonique touche à la

¹ Genet's italics, 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*', p. 8.

² Jean Genet, margin annotation, *Le Balcon*, *Arts*, 1 (6 May 1957).

question de l'identité du sujet énonciateur.'¹ Identity is neither transcendental nor unified. From the single source Carmen, speak several voices. Like any other human activity, linguistic communication is ritualised. Speech is the polyphonic interplay of multiple processed discourses. By exposing the chorus of simultaneous voices that constitute an utterance, Genet illustrates what Barthes terms the 'division schizophrénique du sujet.'² He displaces the origin of the utterance from an impossible transcendental speaking subject to an implicitly fragmented and socially ritualised player.

Polyphony, essentially a musical term like *hoquet*, is defined literally as 'the simultaneous combination of a number of parts, each forming an individual melody, and harmonizing with each other.'³ In the case of singing, each part is sung by a separate individual. In linguistic communication polyphony describes the multiple origin of a linguistic message. The narrator of a novel for example can concurrently be a character in that novel, the narrator, and the author of the book. Whereas in music the emphasis is on harmonisation, in literature the author can make the relationship between the voices either harmonious or discordant.

Maingueneau defines the producer of the linguistic message as the meeting point of three sources of utterance. There is firstly the 'producteur physique de l'énoncé' or the person who utters the words. In Oswald Ducrot's system of polyphony the physical producer of the utterance is the 'locuteur-L'⁴. This speaker-L is directly and unequivocally implicated in the utterance like for example when someone tired sighs or someone amused laughs. There is secondly the person 'qui, en se posant comme énonciateur, se place à l'origine de la référence des embrayeurs', in Maingueneau's words. This speaker positions himself or herself at the origin of the shifters, namely the personal pronouns and possessive adjectives. Ducrot refers to this speaker as the 'locuteur-λ'⁵. The potential for dislocation between the physical producer of the utterance and the subject represented by the shifters is exploited by Genet, as I illustrate.

¹ Dominique Maingueneau, *Éléments de linguistique pour le texte littéraire* (Paris: Dunod, 1993), p. 75.

² Roland Barthes, *Le Bruissement de la langue*, 1984, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), III, p. 109.

³ Oxford English Dictionary.

⁴ I employ this symbol in my study to denote the physical producer of the lines. It is borrowed from Oswald Ducrot, 'Esquisse d'une théorie polyphonique de l'énonciation' in *Le Dire et le dit* (Paris: Minuit, 1984).

⁵ I employ this symbol, again borrowed from Oswald Ducrot, to denote the person at the source of the shifters.

On a practical level, baptism replaces the subject with its linguistic representation, as I clarified in the previous chapter. 'I' can refer to a plurality of subjects, for the signifier-signified relationship is non-sacred. Finally, there is the person who is 'responsable des "actes illocutoires", ou "actes de langage"', speech acts. Speech is performance and speech acts concern the consequences of the utterance on the person addressed. I discuss speech acts in greater detail presently.

A concrete example serves to illustrate the interplay of the three sources of utterance. Arthur, the male prostitute at Irma's 'Grand Balcon' makes his stage entry with the following lines:

[...] Le petit Vieux se reboutonne. Il est à plat. Deux séances en une demi-heure. Avec la fusillade dans les rues, je me demande s'il va arriver jusqu'à son hôtel. (*Il imite le Juge au second tableau.*) Minos te juge... Minos te pèse... Cerbère?... Ouha! Ouha Ouha! (*Il montre les crocs et rit.*) Le Chef de la Police n'est pas arrivé? (p. 75).

He describes the courtroom fantasy in which he has just played the hangman. The speaker-L is obviously Arthur. The speaker- λ is more complex. Arthur begins by positioning himself at the source of the shifters - '*je me demande*' - but then proceeds to imitate the Judge in the Second Tableau. Speakers -L and - λ do not coincide¹. In my last chapter I indicated that Genet broadens the rift between the signifier and the signified, instead of attempting to bridge it. Similarly, he exacerbates the dislocation between the speaker-L and the speaker- λ ². In addition, Arthur's speech acts are dislocated. The second person singular - '*Minos te juge*' - refers both to the present company, Irma or Carmen, and to the thief condemned by the Judge³. Arthur relates the scene with his client, but his ulterior motive is to impress Irma, for whom he harbours affection. He attempts to subordinate her by reciting the lines from the moment in the roleplay when the Judge overwhelms the prostitute. The Judge who Arthur plays is himself a client enacting a role, adding yet another polyphonic layer.

¹ My italics.

² The name Carmen for example derives from the Carmelite order of nuns. The contradiction of a prostitute possessing the name of a nun is obvious. Carmen underscores the irony with comments on holy vows such as '*entrer au bordel, c'est refuser le monde*' (p. 73). When a prostitute substitutes herself for a nun or a criminal for a saint or a pimp for a judge, '*c'est de forcer le diable à être Dieu*', says Genet himself (*Journal du voleur*, p. 232). The incongruity is a source of theatrical energy. The dual states of godliness and gracelessness, vice and virtue, that arise when a speaker-L poses as an incongruous speaker- λ , recreates the theatricality of the Eucharist that I elaborate in Chapter Three.

³ My italics.

The sources of an utterance constitute the complex polyphonic negotiation of influence and intention. Genet dislocates these sources instead of harmonising them. The result is an emphasis on the material, non-verbal surface mechanics of the linguistic utterance, as opposed to concentration on thematic, verbal substance. Speech acts are the most complex of the three polyphonic layers. I study them in greater detail.

(ii) Speech Acts: Performativity and the Communicational Trope

The third source of the utterance, speech acts, is itself multidimensional. J.L. Austin explains that language does not simply transmit messages. An utterance is not just to say something. It is to *do* something. The speaker at the source of the utterance wishes to act upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the person addressed. This performativity possesses force. Austin concludes *How to do Things with Words* with the following statement:

Philosophers have long been interested in the word ‘good’ and, quite recently, have begun to take the line of considering how we use it, what we use it to do. It has been suggested, for example, that we use it for expressing approval, for commending, or for grading. But we shall not get really clear about this word ‘good’ and what we use it to do until, ideally, we have a complete list of these illocutionary acts of which commending, grading, &c., are isolated specimens.¹

Austin’s theory of speech acts reactivates the Saussurian dialectic between *langue* and *parole*². Syntactics and semantism are implicitly contiguous. An imperative, Austin points out, could be an order, but it could equally be a demand, request, suggestion, warning... In my last chapter I demonstrated the possibilities of performative reconfiguration afforded by the unstable relationship of the signifier to the signified. Austin’s call for a definitive list of the perlocutions of ‘good’ is out of place in my study of non-essentialism and absence of inherency. However, Austin suggests that to employ a word is to perform an act, this being useful for my analysis of Genet’s use of polyphony. Expression is now influence, meaning is now reference, representation is now performance. Austin divides speech acts into three sub-categories: ‘We can [...]

¹ J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955, 2nd ed., ed. by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 163-164.

² Austin glosses the ‘phonetic act’ as the uttering of certain sounds. A ‘phatic act’ is the arrangement of the phones or sounds into types of phemes that belong to a specific set of vocabulary, and conform to the grammatical constructions and stress and intonation patterns that constitute discourse. A ‘rhetic act’ is the contextualisation of a pheme, where meaning is attributed to the otherwise abstract pheme. In this way, the Saussurian ‘langue’ is mobilised into ‘parole’.

distinguish the locutionary act “he said that ...” from the illocutionary act “he argued that ...” and the perlocutionary act “he convinced me that...” (p. 102). From the locutionary, to the illocutionary, to the perlocutionary act, the design, intention or purpose of the speaker over the person addressed increases, as impartiality and descriptiveness decrease¹. Arthur’s report of his shenanigans with the Judge is both a locutionary act of description, and an attempted perlocutionary act, for he indirectly seeks to win Irma over. Speech is not merely the communication of information, it is the ritualised foundation of our discursive relation with the world. Genet adds extra layers of speech acts to underscore further the utterance as ritual and artifice. In the example above from *Le Balcon* the tripartition of the speaker’s utterance and speech acts is fragmented further still by Genet, since Arthur masquerades his own perlocutionary intention to dominate Irma behind the Judge’s perlocutionary desire to overwhelm the prostitute. Two sets of speech acts operate simultaneously, each an alibi for the other. The complex polyphonic network constitutes the co-presence of layers that creates a theatrical energy, for the spectator is obliged constantly to trace the origins of the speech acts. In addition, the shifting highlights the multiplicity of sources from which the characters and moreover we are composed.

Arthur’s utterance possesses indirect perlocution in addition to its literal appearance. Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni refers to the potential fissuring of speech acts as the ‘trope communicationnel’, which enables characters to exploit the ambiguity of utterances to their own end, as I illustrate in more detail. But performativity is not just the unrestrained influence of the speaker over the passive receiver. Reception of the utterance is also a performative act. Characters exploit the tropological potential of their interlocutors’ utterances in order to transcend scripted roles, initiate their own agendas, and exercise coercion.

(iii) The Principal and Secondary Persons Addressed

The subject performs an act by speaking. But there is no guarantee that the message uttered and the message received will coincide. Reception is itself a performative

¹ The test Austin provides for evaluating the performativity of an utterance is the following: one must ask ‘does he/she really?’, or is it a superficial gesture or formality? Another test provided by Austin is to ask whether the action could be done in the absence of words, namely if the performance carries more weight than the utterance, the doing more weight than the saying.

hermeneutical act, as tropological margins exist at both ends of the communication process. The production and interpretation of the linguistic message involve different practices, but they employ analogous processes. Both linguistic production and reception are susceptible to figurative use. The speaker's utterances can assume a range of different illocutionary forces, and the person addressed can exploit the tropological nature of these forces.

In her 'Problèmes méthodologiques en analyse des conversations: le fonctionnement du trilogue' Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni outlines the concept of the principal and secondary persons addressed in linguistic exchange¹. Whereas in the *dilogue*, a conversation between two parties, the person addressed is obvious, the sequence inevitably being *abababab*, Kerbrat-Orecchioni points out that the *trilogue*, between three parties, or a *quadrilogue*, are more complex because the direct person addressed could be one or any combination of the people present. Speech is not bipolar. It constitutes a circuit of direct and indirect exchanges. The identity of the person directly addressed is obvious if certain signals are clear, for example if personal pronouns, names and paraverbal or non-verbal indications are used literally². However, in some instances the speaker directs an utterance at one present party, intending it for another, the 'indirect person addressed'. Kerbrat-Orecchioni prefers the terms principal person addressed (L¹) and secondary person addressed (L²) because the person spoken to is not always the direct person addressed. By interrupting or raising the voice, the indirect person addressed can auto-select, nominating him/herself as L¹. Distinguishing L¹ and L² when *reading* a theatrical piece involves close textual analysis because, as opposed to novelistic form where the narrator often guides the reader, informing him/her of who addresses whom, the playwright rarely stipulates the principal and secondary persons addressed. According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni's theory, L¹ and L² only arise in conversations of three or more speakers. Genet transgresses these norms by splitting a

¹ Catherine Kerbrat Orecchioni, 'Problèmes méthodologiques en analyse des conversations: Le Fonctionnement du trilogue', lecture given at Université de Toulouse - Le Mirail, April 1996.

² The difference between the paraverbal and the non-verbal is the following: whereas the paraverbal comprises materiality of the voice, namely pauses, tempo, intonation, prosody, the non-verbal, or what Austin terms 'accompaniments', comprise materiality of the body, namely gestures such as a wink, wave, shrug, frown, glance, walk, direction in which the character faces, etc. In theatre, the costumes, make-up, set, lighting, etc. are also non-verbal indications. Laughing, sighing and crying are midway between the verbal and the non-verbal. In this dissertation I employ 'non-verbal' as an umbrella term that encompasses both the paraverbal and the non-verbal, according to these definitions.

single person addressed, whether part of a trilogy or dialogue, into both L^1 and L^2 . When Arthur imitates the Judge, Irma becomes a highly complex combination of a substitute L^1 in the absence of the prostitute, and a present L^2 for Arthur's coded sexual proposition. Genet fissures both speaker and person addressed into a multitude of voices, by dislocating the speech acts from their source and destination.

Kerbrat-Orecchioni goes on to specify two types of possible intervention: initiative and reactive. When we ask a question, we initiate conversation. Answering questions on the other hand, whether verbally or non-verbally, is a reactive response to the interlocutor's initiative. Turn-taking conventionally adheres to a waiting system. Kerbrat-Orecchioni employs the term 'truncation' to define a situation whereby a speech partner fails to respect the practice of turn-taking, for example by interrupting or refusing to answer. Interlocutors cause an infraction by failing to adhere to their part of the conversational exchange bargain. Genet's characters truncate each other's utterances repeatedly, not only by interrupting and failing to answer, but also by exploiting the tropologically ambiguous nature of the utterance. Genet adds layer upon layer of speech acts to his characters' utterances, showing communicational intervention as the dissymmetrical pattern of production on the one hand, and recognition, interpretation and manipulation on the other. In this way Genet empowers persons addressed to violate the communicational pact of initiation and reaction. Irma for example has the choice either to take Arthur's utterance at face value, or to concede to his amorous proposition. Characters can exploit the multiple layers of speech acts to initiate their own agendas.

So, Genet adds polyphonic layers instead of removing them. He adds ambiguity instead avoiding it. He multiplies illusion instead of eradicating it. The consequences of the elaborate polyphonic network he weaves are manifold. The co-presence of multiple layers of speech acts affords dramatic effect because voices speaking from any one character disappear and reappear constantly. The spectator is therefore made to trace the origins and destinations of utterances. In addition, the alternation from one speech act to another inevitably diverts the spectator's attention from the content of dialogues to their form, thus underscoring the surface materiality that characterises speech. Roles and masks become another material, non-verbal sign that Genet adds to his pluralistic theatrical repertoire. But whilst Breton and the Surrealists attempt to disrupt the notion

of dialogic convention in order to base communication on automatism, Genet's subversion does not follow in the psycho-analytical tradition. His characters manipulate each other's utterances, but their initiations are not impulsive. They all take place within the parameters of an extremely complex system of communication rules. Polyphony as a *Verfremdungseffekt* externalises the ritualised dimension of speech and shows utterances both on stage and in the spectator's life to be the fragmented product of multiple external influences. Polyphonic shifting and reconfiguration through the communicational trope illustrate the lack of a unifying origin, and at the same time deliver a certain mobility within the static parameters of communicational orthodoxy. They exercise relative freedom within inevitable closure. But the price paid for this relative creativity is isolation. Truncation through manipulation of the communicational trope gives the impression that communication fails and that characters stand isolated, misunderstood and alone.

I illustrate these broader definitions that come under the umbrella term of polyphony, a central non-verbal signifier across Genet's theatre, with reference to the Fifth Tableau of *Le Balcon*.

II. Textual analysis

Polyphonic shifting in Genet's theatre can be discerned firstly by studying his use of interruption. Non-verbal, verbal, paraverbal, tropological or thematic interruptions denote the switching from one role to the next, as I show.

(i) Non-Verbal interruption

Genet employs certain aspects of set and acoustics in order to produce the effect of constant interruption. Interruptions echo the polyphonic switching from role to role that occurs within the tableaux.

In *Le Balcon* each tableau literally interrupts the preceding one by physically running into it. Genet explains how the sets must 's'emboîter les uns dans les autres'¹. This visual device points to interruptions and alternations between roles that take place

¹ 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*', p. 8.

in Genet's plays. The set for each tableau '*se déplace de gauche à droite, comme si elle s'enfonçait dans la coulisse*' (p. 29). Because the set for each tableau enters to the left and exits to the right, the spectator has the impression that a bottleneck of sets must be accumulating in the right-hand wing¹. It is as though the sets lack a sense of turn-taking protocol, in the same way as the characters do. It must be for this reason that Genet condemns Peter Brook's 1960 production, in which the director's circular revolving stage eliminates the possibility of this imaginary pile-up². Shortly before the Fifth Tableau in the 1956 version of the play, the three photographers of the Ninth Tableau glide slowly without stopping across the stage on a piece of movable set. This set seems to pose as a metaphor for speakers in the Fifth Tableau, who continue with their own lines regardless of their interlocutors' utterances³.

The tableaux thus interrupt each other physically. The tableaux themselves are also beset with interruptions. The Fifth Tableau begins with machine gun fire, and shelling is heard twice more during the tableau (pp. 54, 62 & 69). Madame Irma's surveillance device interrupts conversations between Irma and Carmen, and then between Irma and Georges, no less than six times (p. 57). Conversations are also forestalled by Arthur knocking and entering, and then by the Chief of Police, who enters without warning, as do both Carmen and Arthur at the end of the tableau (pp. 73, 79 & 90). Other non-verbal interruptions are caused by Georges slapping Irma, and a window being shattered by a bullet from a revolutionary gun (pp. 89 & 91). The audience cannot but remark these interruptions, with which it is assaulted. They sometimes demarcate changes from role to role. A slap transforms Irma from a dominatrix into the Chief of Police's grovelling servant. Shelling transports Carmen from the illusion of her erotic roleplays, to the illusion of the revolution. This possible concordance of form with content constitutes an interesting contrast with the refusal of a direct metaphorical use of the signifier, which I discuss with reference to textual rhythm and production and

¹ Genet writes in his 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*': je veux que les tableaux se succèdent, que les décors se déplacent de gauche à droite, comme s'ils allaient s'emboîter les uns dans les autres, sous les yeux du spectateur' (p. 8).

² Genet adds the idea of sets running into each other to his revised version of *Les Paravents*. At the end of the Third Tableau he writes: '*Mais déjà, dès la dernière réplique de Saïd, le paravent était en marche*' (Genet's italics, p. 45). He also requests similar effects for the ends of the Fourth and Eleventh Tableaux of this play. Genet perhaps recognises this theatrical device as an effective parallel for truncation and intrusion in communication.

³ Jean Genet, *Le Balcon* (Décines: Marc Barbezat, 1956), p. 57.

performance, in Chapters Five and Six. I am reluctant even in this chapter to attribute acoustic or stage set interruption directly to role-shifting for, as I clarify in my ensuing chapters, no sign in Genet's work is immovably answerable to a referent. Direct, unequivocal metaphorical connections would betray Genet's commitment to instability.

Set and acoustics are structured so as to create a background effect of incessant interrupting. But the most significant interruptions are caused not by external forces beyond the characters' control, but by the characters themselves.

(ii) Verbal Interruption

Genet's characters quite rarely recite lengthy monologues, particularly in *Le Balcon*. Actual exchange between interlocutors is nevertheless so reduced, that they might as well speak in monologue. Characters interrupt each other with total disregard for turn-taking practice, giving the impression that they speak alone. Genet adds to the revised version of *Le Balcon* numerous stage directions that indicate his characters' disregard for the utterances of their interlocutors¹. A close analysis of Genet's modifications to the revised version of *Le Balcon* indicates clearly his interest in verbal interruption. He removes many instances of *oui* and *non* from the 1956 edition, causing characters to truncate instead of acknowledge each other's utterances. Characters speak over rather than to each other.

I divide the Fifth Tableau of *Le Balcon* into three sections: the first from the beginning until Arthur's entry; the second from Arthur's entry until his departure; the third from Arthur's departure, this being the Chief of Police's entry, to the end of the tableau. I draw the following conclusions regarding the number of interruptions made by characters. In the first section both Irma and Carmen each make seventy interventions. For both, around one fifth of them are interruptions². These statistics come as a surprise because appearances might lead the spectator to believe that Irma is the dominant party,

¹ Examples include '*Irma, enchaînant sur sa précédente tirade*' (p. 71), which is not in the 1956 version.

² Carmen - 12 out of 70 interventions: 17%. Irma - 15 out of 70: 21%. A comparison with other dramatic works reveals this use of interruption to be highly exaggerated. The whole of Racine's *Bajazet* contains only 3 interruptions; Corneille's *Cinna* and Beckett's *Fin de partie* only contain one each. Both Claudel's *L'Annonce faite à Marie* and Musset's *Lorenzaccio* contain none at all. Molière's *Dom Juan* and Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* both display rather more (2% of Act III Scene II of *Dom Juan* and 10% of Scene VII of *La Cantatrice chauve*) but they still do not compare with the tableau I analyse here, where an average of 30% of the interventions are interruptions.

since she is Carmen's pimp, and forbids her employee to see her daughter. But in 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*' Genet requires the following power dynamic between the women: '*Essayer de rendre sensible la rivalité qui paraît exister entre Irma et Carmen. Je veux dire : qui dirige - la maison et la pièce? Carmen ou Irma?*' (p. 9)¹. The thematic content of the dialogues does not reflect Carmen's threat to Irma's leadership. Carmen has a smaller part in the play than Irma in terms of the quantity of time spent on stage and dialogue uttered, but she appears nonetheless to dominate through the non-verbal signifier of interruption. The signifier alone - the material truncation of Irma's utterances - conveys this power dynamic, therefore signifying in excess of semantic signification. In the third section of the tableau for example nearly all Carmen's small handful of utterances are interruptions². In spite of her fairly low profile in the Fifth Tableau, the dominance she exercises in the final tableaux is pre-empted here through the perlocutionary force of her interruptions. By the same token Arthur, by far the feeblest member of the *Grand Balcon*, dares make hardly any interruptions, this reflecting his lowly status³. Interruption frequency appears to be proportionate to the power represented by characters. Genet succeeds here in communicating to the audience through the non-verbal. In my last chapter I stated that Genet and Artaud share in common a desire to undermine faith in psychological characterisation on stage. In addition I stress constantly that unlike Artaud, Genet is no iconoclast. The power struggle motif in *Le Balcon*, embedded in the non-verbal signifier of interruption, testifies to Genet's inclusion of every manner and mode of theatrical expression. Genet combines facets of psychological characterisation with clownesque abstraction in a manner similar to Samuel Beckett⁴. Moreover, Genet mixes together a refusal of directly attributable metaphor which creates discordant characters, with an truncation which here is metaphorical, for it translates power dynamics. Genet succeeds in subverting by

¹ Genet's italics.

² Carmen makes 6 utterances, compared with the Chief of Police's 53 and Irma's 47. 66% of Carmen's are interruptions, as opposed to the Chief of Police's 23% and Irma's 17%.

³ Out of 27 of his utterances, Arthur interrupts twice, ie. 7%, as opposed to Irma's 27% in the same section of the tableau.

⁴ By way of example, Vladimir and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot*, and Hamm and Clov in *End Game* are accessible human beings who speak of their physical pain, their fears, their loneliness and their dependence on each other. In this respect the audience can at once empathise with them. Concurrently, Beckett's characters are abstract and alien. Beckett strikes a perfect balance, for he alienates his spectators with his self-consciously 'false' characters, and then draws the same spectators in with hints characterisation to which one can relate easily. I feel Genet maintains the same equilibrium.

including a hybrid diversity of mythologies, styles and approaches, that ultimately elevates none of them.

Characters truncate each other in far more manipulative and insidious ways than simply by curtailing through verbal interruption. They also exploit the communicational trope implicit in the co-presence of multiple polyphonic layers inherent in speech.

(iii) Exploitation of the Communicational Trope

In a study on theatrical dialogue André Petitjean refers to truncation in the following terms:

l'interlocuteur ne se soumet ni au contenu thématique des propos de l'autre ni à leurs enjeux interlocutifs [...] mais se donne les moyens de réguler la conversation [...] en modifiant les thèmes du dialogue.¹

I have indicated that within one utterance, speak several voices. The person addressed exploits this multiple presence by responding to connotations present in the utterance that were supposed to pass unnoticed, and by refusing to react to the intended meaning. Petitjean introduces the notion of a hierarchy of information. A speaker's utterance might be literal, but the person addressed reverses the hierarchy and truncates this utterance by exploiting its tropological flexibility. This stratagem is disguised as a conversational misunderstanding. The other speaker is now ensnared in a conversation he/she did not initiate. Genet's characters force their interlocutors into roles by reversing the hierarchy of information. This occurs so frequently, that the role-swapping becomes more noticeable than the individuals that play roles. Non-verbal alternation between roles becomes more significant than the roles or characters themselves.

Examples of this form of interruption are manifold in the Fifth Tableau. Carmen yearns to visit her daughter, but Irma tries to prevent her. Instead of blatantly saying no or discreetly changing the subject, Irma deviously substitutes herself for an absent person addressed. Instead of answering as Irma, Carmen's boss, she answers as Irma play-acting in one of the fantasy scenes usually played out by the customers, thus positioning herself as L^2 instead of L^1 :

CARMEN [...] Ma fille m'aime.

¹ André Petitjean, 'La conversation au théâtre', edition entitled 'L'écriture théâtrale', *Pratiques*, 41 (March 1984), p. 71.

IRMA *elle est très didactique, ici : Tu es la princesse lointaine qui vient la voir avec des jouets et des parfums (p. 58).*

and later:

CARMEN Maintenant, tout en moi se tourne vers ma fille, Madame Irma. Elle est dans un vrai jardin...

IRMA Tu ne pourras pas aller la rejoindre et d'ici peu le jardin sera dans ton coeur (p. 59).

Carmen speaks in the role of hankering mother. Irma exploits her wistfulness by responding as though they were playing fantasy roles. She subverts the hierarchy of information by speaking with a gusto and flurry of imagery reminiscent of the Bishop, Judge and General in the preceding tableaux. She forces Carmen out of being speaker- λ the mother, into being speaker- λ the prostitute. She deliberately misreads Carmen's speech acts so that the latter's perlocution of wanting to see her daughter is manipulated into the locution of describing a scene with a client.

In Kerbrat-Orecchioni's opinion theatrical dialogue, when performed, is unquestionably easier to follow than novelistic dialogue, for characters on stage signal clearly their destined person addressed¹. Genet subverts this convention of clarity. The spectator is neither sure in which role a character speaks, nor which of the interlocutor's polyphonic voices the speaker addresses. In the conversation between Irma and Carmen, is Irma speaker- λ the friend, or speaker- λ the prostitute in a fantasy roleplay? And does she address Carmen as L¹ the mother, or L² another prostitute in a roleplay?

Carmen manipulates her interlocutors' speech acts just as much as Irma does. In fact, through exploitation of the communicational trope Genet again presents Carmen metaphorically as even more conniving than the other characters. She remonstrates against Irma's confidentiality rule that forbids prostitutes to divulge details about their sessions with clients. Carmen nevertheless launches into a diatribe on her exploits with clients. But she engineers her utterance in such a way that she speaks about Irma and not about herself, therefore indirectly avoiding indiscretion. She says 'si une seule fois vous mettiez la robe et le voile bleu, ou si vous étiez la pénitente dégrafée [...] ou la paysanne culbutée dans la paille...' (p. 56). 'Moi!' Irma interrupts, aghast at Carmen's scant

¹ Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 'Le Dialogue romanesque', paper given at Toulouse University, 11th September 1996.

respect for the rules. Carmen speaks about her own adventures with the clients. She is at the source of the perlocutionary force. However, she positions Irma as speaker- λ by saying ‘si vous...’, so that the erotic misadventures are nominally Irma’s and not her own¹. She is therefore not in breach of Irma’s strict code of confidentiality, and can continue to indulge herself in her description: ‘Ou la soubrette en tablier rose, ou l’archiduchesse dépucelée par le gendarme [...]’ (p. 56).

The most striking example of tropological truncation is provided when the allied forces of Irma and Carmen ridicule the Chief of Police during his first moments on stage. In her study of conversational dynamics Kerbrat-Orecchioni argues that that the trilogy is potentially more aggressive than the dialogue because the trio can splinter into a duo plus a third party². The duo can be either consensual, namely the product of a coalition, or conflictual, in which case the third party acts either as a mediator who attempts to allay the conflict; or as a *tertius gaudens* who turns the duo’s dissension discreetly to his/her own gain; or finally as despot who sets the other two off against each other. Genet employs these conversational dynamics in the third section of the Fifth Tableau to emphasise the power games at play. As I have explained, set rules for conversation are established by society, but characters manipulate these rules in a multitude of singular ways, to exploit each other. When the section is viewed via Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s model, Carmen is yet again the most manipulative and power-wielding of the three characters despite her apparently deferential submission. Her superior power is communicated through the non-verbal dynamics of conversation and not through the thematic content of dialogue. Irma and Carmen form a consensual coalition in the incipient stages of the third section of this tableau. They are as thick as thieves when the Chief of Police first arrives. Irma for example flatters Carmen by claiming she possesses ‘le génie de la description’, a loaded statement for Genet’s part, seeing as Carmen is the character who most manipulates the tropological potential of utterance in the play (p. 80). Still secure that Irma will not act as a *tertius gaudens* or despot behind her back because of the coalition, Carmen forms a conflictual duo with Georges. ‘Ça marche en ce moment?’, asks the Chief of Police, desperate to know whether his image has been eternally endorsed through enactment by a client in a fantasy roleplay (p. 80). ‘Merveilleusement.

¹My italics.

² ‘Problèmes méthodologiques en analyse des conversations’.

J'ai eu quelques grandes représentations', answers Irma, tantalising Georges with potential good tidings (p. 80). The taunting continues. Irma and Carmen exploit the tropological potential of Georges's utterances, beguiling him into believing they are unaware of the motive behind his questioning. Georges continues imploringly:

LE CHEF DE LA POLICE	Raconte, Carmen. Toujours?...
CARMEN	Toujours, oui, monsieur. Toujours les piliers de l'Empire.
LE CHEF DE LA POLICE	<i>ironique</i> : Nos allégories, nos armes parlantes. Et puis, y a-t-il?...
CARMEN	Comme chaque semaine, un thème nouveau. (<i>Geste de curiosité du Chef de la Police.</i>) Cette fois c'est le bébé giflé, fessé, bordé qui pleure et qu'on berce (p. 80).
LE CHEF DE LA POLICE	<i>impatient</i> : Bien. Mais...
CARMEN	Il est charmant, monsieur. Et si triste!
LE CHEF DE LA POLICE	<i>irrité</i> : C'est tout?
CARMEN	Et si joli quand on l'a démaillotté...

The Chief of Police's 'toujours?' no doubt means 'still', and should lead to 'still nothing?' It is interrupted by Carmen. Georges desperately wishes to know if he has become part of the Nomenclature. Carmen's interruption enables her to interpret Georges's utterance differently from how he intended. She can answer *yes* as in 'yes, the Nomenclature is still the same and you're not on it'. This leads the Chief of Police a merry dance. Carmen does this a second time when the Chief of Police pleads 'c'est tout?' She chooses to interpret this as the Chief of Police's request for more details about the erotic roleplays, knowing full well he just wishes to know if his name has been added. Instead, she provides him with more information about the baby-in-a-nappy scenario. The more irate the Chief of Police becomes, the more obtuse Irma and Carmen choose to be. The brief war of attrition waged by Irma and Carmen culminates in Georges exploding 'tu te fous de moi, Carmen?' (p. 80).

Characters speak in several roles simultaneously, meaning that their interlocutors can receive utterances according to which role they choose to respond to. Carmen

transforms the imploring perlocution of Georges's utterance into a simple locution. He is desperate to know if he has been enacted. But he could just as well be asking about the weather. Characters can take on roles due to the unstable site of the speaker- λ , and can force others into roles because of the equivocal status of L^1 and L^2 . The seemingly elementary convention of initiation and reaction is shot to pieces by Genet's characters. Instead of reacting to Georges, Carmen truncates his utterances and initiates her own agendas. Her power is represented metaphorically by these conversational dynamics. Carmen and Irma are tuned in to one polyphonic wavelength, whereas Georges is on another. The cross-wires mean that the spectator is kept in suspense, never knowing in which roles characters will initiate and respond to utterances. Interestingly, the consensual dynamic and Carmen's reversal of the hierarchy of information is exaggerated greatly in the 1962 version of *Le Balcon* in comparison with its earlier 1956 counterpart.

The theatrical effects are multiple. In the first instant the scene's rhythm jars, for it is fragmented into as many private agendas of speech acts as there are characters and roles. Secondly, Genet clearly wishes to stylise the mechanics of communication into a *Verfremdungseffekt*, to expose the domination of form and roleplay over genuine interlocutionary exchange. This mouthing of roles and scripts is quasi-spontaneous, in that it employs rules of subversion to subvert rules. Genet plays with a conventional deck of cards, namely utterances and their perlocutionary force, but he plays a game the rules of which are unfamiliar. The resultant effect is that co-operation between characters is non-existent. This lack of veritable exchange, recurrent in Genet's theatre from the black and white Queens in *Les Nègres* who never address each other directly, to the maids and Madame in *Les Bonnes* whose communicational spheres appear never to overlap, illustrates the characters' isolation. Individuals speak in roles. They are incapable of uttering genuine, true feelings or thoughts. But the result of any attempt to inscribe utterances with the singularity of the individual and transcend role recital, results only in further isolation, for exchanges are inevitably misunderstood. Here, Genet establishes highly original, multi-faceted characters that are fragmented by the roles they switch between. Some roles remind us of more typically psychological dimensions to character, such as loneliness. Genet however does not concede to the pre-eminence of a

psychological definition of the human. He excludes no approach to a definition of the human condition save that which claims to be infallible. He pieces together *all* approaches, including psychology, to form a pointillist impression of our appearance.

I have shown how utterances are truncated by non-verbal and verbal interruption, and by exploitation of the communicational trope through reversal of the hierarchy of information. These devices constitute external truncation. But interruption in Genet's theatre does not occur solely from one dialogue to the next. It can occur mid-dialogue, further enhancing the impression of staccato rhythm and constant alternation between roles. Auto-interruption can be either paraverbal, whereby characters interrupt their own utterances with a silence, sigh or laugh, or altering of intonation, or else verbal, whereby characters modify their own utterances by literally commenting on them. I refer firstly to paraverbal interruption, and then to metacommentary.

(iv) Paraverbal Interruption: Intonation

Irma's speech is far and away the most fragmented in the tableau. This is reflected in Genet's exaggerated use of paraverbal interruption. Irma seems almost incapable of sustaining fluid speech¹. Her utterances are sundered more than anything by intonational modification. The acute fluctuation in her intonation is a clear indication of the constant role-swapping she practises. The lengths to which Genet goes to stipulate intonation in the revised edition compared with the 1956 edition illustrates the primordial importance of this non-verbal, or rather paraverbal signifier.

Genet uses the word 'ton' to refer to several different concepts. In his *Lettres à Roger Blin* he speaks of 'ton' in terms of atmosphere or mood: 'Par ce texte je voulais recréer la prison. Je n'ai pas trouvé le ton.' (p. 40). It can also refer to the pitch of the voice: 'Descendre la voix de deux ou trois tons. Elle est trop posé' (p. 45). Vocal pitch is a component of intonation. I translate Genet's term 'ton' in the fifth tableau of *Le Balcon* as intonation. I employ the works of Charles Bally - *Traité de stylistique française I* - in an attempt to define the general word 'intonation', and then illustrate how Genet exploits this physical aspect of speech in order, again, to foreground the expression rather than

¹ In total during the whole of the Fifth Tableau Irma interrupts herself either with a silence, a sigh or a laugh 29 times, in stark contrast with Carmen's 5, the Chief of Police's 4 and Arthur's 7. Converting these results into percentages would falsify the data, because there is often more than one interruption per utterance, and utterance length can obviously vary greatly.

content of the utterance, in turn underscoring ritual rather than real exchange¹.

Intonation holds the key to the nuances and subtleties of an utterance. It is the ‘mouvement affectif’, the relationship between the speaker’s utterance and his or her thoughts or feelings (p. 270). According to Bally, intonation, namely the inflection of the voice modified by stress, intensity and pitch at both syllable and sentence level, is ‘le commentaire perpétuel de la parole et, par conséquent, de la pensée.’ (pp. 268 & 294). Intonation is the expression or the material form, whether affective or intellectual, rather than the content of the speaker’s utterance. Genet draws attention to this form by stylising it.

Whereas phonemic pronunciation is governed by laws and is inexpressive according to Bally, intonation is much more evasive and unstable. Intonation is a collection of very delicately nuanced and complex material phonic phenomena for which there is still no satisfactory graphic recording except for the exclamation and question marks, these themselves rudimentary, approximative and incomplete². In the absence of adequate scientific methods for recording intonation, Genet’s copious stage directions fortunately go some way towards sparing a stylistician the arbitrariness of instinctive interpretation.

Following the roller-coaster of emotions Genet stipulates in his stage directions to *Le Balcon* is sufficient evidence of the frequency with which Irma changes roles. In the relatively brief conversation between Irma and Carmen in the first section of the Fifth Tableau, Genet recommends the following wildly varied uses of tone in the delivery of Irma’s lines: ‘*agacée; conciliante; docte; déconcertée; choquée; très sévère; inquiète; rêveuse; didactique; riant aux éclats; étonnée; inexorable; très intéressée; inquiète; rappelant à l’ordre; effrayée; soudain lyrique; modeste; avec sévérité; tendre; triomphante; mélancolique; pensive; autoritaire*’...³. On several occasions Genet explicitly calls for a ‘*changement de ton*’, showing how important alternation between tones is, for it denotes alternation between roles (p. 65). In addition, the characters themselves draw self-conscious attention to their use of tone:

¹ Charles Bally, *Traité de stylistique française I* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1909).

² A question can have an infinity of perlocutionary forces. It can be begging, humble, imperative, curious, expectant, impatient or demanding, and can require any manner of response, or no response at all (the rhetorical question).

³ These intonation changes are all taken from the Fifth Tableau.

ARTHUR *légèrement inquiet* : Tu blagues, j'espère?...

IRMA *soudain très autoritaire* : Le ton de ma dernière réplique devrait te renseigner (p. 77).

The fact that the characters give instructions as to whether they are speaking sarcastically or not, is a telling sign of their alternation between roles. As I have stated, characters draw the spectator's attention frequently to their use of intonation by making self-conscious remarks. Carmen for example says 'que vous êtes bonne, je le disais sans ironie, madame Irma' (p. 64). Speaking without irony is not tantamount to speaking sincerely. It is playing the role of sincerity. Each tone represents another role in the repertory of falsity.

Intonational modification highlights role change. However, individual tones do not pertain to specific roles. Genet refuses metaphorical signification in order to afford an opacity to the signifier, this opacity further enhancing the concept of the utterance as an empty surface, devoid of substance. Roger Blin describes the tone of Genet's theatre as 'totalement poétique, mais on ne peut pas jouer cette poésie-là dans un style poétique.'¹ Genet insists on a dislocation between the poetry of the words and the mood and tone with which the spectator would expect the lines to be delivered. Irma for example speaks in poetic tones about book-keeping: 'Je t'enseignerai les chiffres! Les merveilleux chiffres qui nous feront passer des nuits ensemble, à calligraphier' (p. 71). The disparity between the signified - comments on the brothel's accounts - and the signifier - the poetic tone - effects a stylisation that draws attention to the materiality of the utterance, namely the intonation. Speech in Genet's theatre is shown to be form, devoid of content. This prevents any real exchange between individuals, who do nothing except recite lines.

Dislocation of the signifier from the signified here shows that intonation can be modified as easily as a mask can be put on and removed. The number of occasions that characters interrupt themselves can be taken as directly proportionate to the frequency with which they change the roles enacted. No sooner is the tone set, than it is infiltrated by another, creating another mood, and signalling the donning of another mask. Intonation enables Carmen to switch from mother to prostitute. It enables the bank clerk

¹ Roger Blin, 'Témoignages - Extraits de Roger Blin, souvenirs et propos', edited by Lynda Bellity Peskine, Gallimard 1986, in *La Bataille des Paravents*, p. 24.

to play a judge. It enables the black man Diouf in *Les Nègres* to play a white virgin. It facilitates the co-presence on stage of multiple, constantly changing and interpenetrating roles, hence adding dramatic tension to the performance, for the spectators are forced constantly to ask themselves which role a character plays. Moreover, like all theatrical elements that are self-consciously fashioned into *Verfremdungseffekte*, Genet's intonational modifications comment on human existence. It is impossible to formulate a synthetic psychological impression of the characters on stage, as they are shattered into a thousand arbitrary and contradictory tones. But, as I explained in my previous chapter, self-conscious theatre underscores by implication artifice both on and off stage. The spectators are no more integral than the disjointed clowns on stage.

(v) *Metacommentary*

I have illustrated how characters interrupt themselves by changing intonation. They also interrupt the course of their dialogue with self-conscious commentary. They consequently fissure the speaker- λ in two. This form of parenthesis, namely metacommentary, is indicated either by a dash (-), conjunctions or the use of words pertaining to the lexical set of theatrical rehearsal, as I illustrate.

The *dash* is defined as the 'punctuation mark, used singly in place of a colon, especially to indicate a sudden change of subject or grammatical anacoluthon'¹. Like modifications to intonation, the dash effects an interruption. It causes fracturing of either thematic, syntactical or grammatical constructions, thus dividing the source of the utterance into two speaker- λ 's. From one speaker-L, come two voices: one that utters, and the other that comments on the utterance. There is no shortage of examples, again provided principally by Irma, who again possesses the most disjointed speech². She remarks upon the modifications that one of the prostitutes, Rachel, has introduced into the roleplay with the heroic 'légionnaire': 'Quelle idée, aussi, de se faire viser comme par un Arabe et de mourir - *si l'on peut dire* - au garde-à-vous sur un tas de sable!' (p. 60)³. Irma's comment on her own powers of description draws attention to the form of

¹ Anacoluthon is defined by Henri Morier, *Dictionnaire de poétique et de rhétorique* as a 'rupture de construction syntaxique' (Paris: P.U.F.), p. 102).

² Irma's metacommentary interruptions number 17, in comparison with Carmen who makes none at all, and the Chief of Police and Arthur, who make 2 a piece.

³ My italics.

her utterance, and in addition self-consciously indicates her own alternation between the speech acts of describing and of commenting on the description.

Conjunctions also highlight the interjection of metacommentary. J.L. Austin underscores the value of conjunctions and adverbials such as *still*, *therefore* or *although*. They indicate whether the speaker is insisting, concluding or conceding, respectively. These parts of speech in theory are the mortar of an utterance; they are discourse markers that hold the utterance together. However, Genet employs them in order to fragment utterances instead of cementing them. Irma employs conjunctions frequently to introduce self-contradiction. She changes tack in her very first line in the Fifth Tableau: 'Il va arriver, s'il arrive... dans une de ces colères! Et *pourtant...*' (p. 54)¹. And shortly afterwards she says 'je ne me permets même pas, moi [...] de dire les clients. Et *pourtant...*' (p. 55)². And later: 'Ils ne vous fécondent jamais, et *pourtant...*' (p. 58)³. In these examples Irma clearly interrupts herself and changes tack. It is not unusual for her utterances to change direction twice in the space of one dialogue: 'Je me demande même si... [...] si monsieur Georges ne s'est pas fait descendre en route. *Quoiqu'un* chef de la police sache se protéger. [...] Il est en retard. [...] *Ou bien* il n'a pas osé sortir (p. 57)⁴. She fractures her own continuity repeatedly through metacommentary and contradiction. She shatters the suspension of disbelief in her role, switching to another role.

Frequent self-conscious references to the world of theatrical production and performance point to characters commenting on their own dialogues, splitting the speaker- λ into both speaker and commentator. Words relating to rehearsing and theatrical performance do not feature in the earlier version of the play. Genet clearly adds them to highlight artifice and roleplay. Irma and Carmen often correct each other's lines, this suggesting that their words are scripted instead of spontaneous. In the Fifth Tableau Irma reminds Carmen that her father is a colonel in the cavalry, not in the artillery. This throws into question whether Carmen's father held either of the two positions, or whether he, along with Carmen's daughter even exists. Perhaps they are no more than a slip of the tongue in a badly rehearsed line. All utterance is again shown to be scripted.

¹ My italics.

² My italics.

³ My italics. This use of 'pourtant' is added to the last edition of the play, and is not so prolific in the first edition.

⁴ My italics.

Its content is irrelevant and meaningless. Irma says ‘mais *reprenons*. Mon chéri, la maison décolle vraiment, quitte la terre, [...]’, and later ‘je *reprends*’, and ‘le ton de ma dernière *réplique* devrait te renseigner. Je ne *joue* plus. Ou plus le même *rôle*, si tu veux’ (pp. 66, 67 & 77)¹. The use of the words ‘lines’, ‘play’ and ‘roles’ need no commentary². They indicate clearly the performative theatricality of speech. Characters sometimes appear to forget their lines. Irma says ‘mais quand tu t’exaltes à partir du mot putain, que tu te répètes et dont tu te pares comme... comme... comme... (*Elle cherche et trouve.*) comme d’une parure [...]’. She evidently improvises her lines, this indicated by the ungainly repetition of ‘pares’ and ‘parure’. Genet performs the ultimate subversion by redefining improvisation as scripted recital. As I have stated, any spontaneity subsists only within the closure of set discursive patterns.

Irma is not simply a pimp; she is playing at being a pimp and therefore recites the appropriate lines. She also plays at being a prostitute when it suits her. Which prostitute, and in which fantasy, depends on the moment. This tableau, supposedly an everyday scene between two business partners, is no different from the blatant artifice of the first four tableaux. Identity is once again proven to be the result of transitory mask-wearing. Metacommentary by means of the dash, conjunctions and the vocabulary of performance draws attention self-consciously to the concept of roleplay. The non-verbal signifier of the alternation between roles becomes of greater significance than the roles themselves.

(vi) *Thematic Interruption*

Theoretically, the thematic dimension of an utterance would be classed along with the plot and semantic content of the play, as opposed to with formal expression. Genet succeeds in subverting this convention. Characters change their themes so frequently, that the alternation between themes becomes more noticeable to the spectator than the themes themselves.

The Fifth Tableau provides numerous examples of thematic interruption. Many

¹ My italics in each example.

² Examples of the use of words from the semantic field of play-acting and rehearsal prevail throughout Genet’s theatre. Later in the tableau the characters use the expressions ‘l’art de feindre et de jouer’; ‘répliques’; ‘simuler’; ‘reprandre’; and ‘rôles’ (pp. 102-103.) In *Les Nègres* the actor playing the Valet says to Archibald ‘reprends ta voix’ (p. 112). In *Les Bonnes* Solange says to her sister ‘reprends ton visage. Allons, Claire, redeviens ma soeur...’ (p. 34). In all these examples overt reference to theatrical roleplay is apparent.

instances were added to the second version of *Le Balcon*, indicating clearly Genet's interest in this device. Characters modify thematic content erratically, Irma again being the principal perpetrator. In particular, the changes appear to be produced by a move from the important to the trivial, the poetic to the banal. Irma flutters from being raconteur extraordinaire of erotic fantasies to fussing over household expenses: 'J'ai l'impression qu'il voudrait modifier le scénario et qu'à partir d'aujourd'hui il va mourir à l'hôpital militaire, bordé par une infirmière... Nouvel uniforme à acheter. Toujours des frais' (p. 61); from relating tremulous accounts of the encroaching revolution to occupying herself with accounts: 'avec une trouille qui les excite. La narine béante, derrière le mur de feu et de fer ils reniflent l'orgie. Reprenons nos comptes, veux-tu?' (p.72). Irma brings her own departure into the ether of Promethean lyricism joltily down to earth with platitudes about her school grades:

IRMA [...] salons, filles, cristaux, dentelles, balcon, tout fout le camp,
 s'élève et m'emporte!

Long silence. Les deux femmes sont immobiles, debout, l'une devant l'autre.

CARMEN Comme vous parlez bien.

IRMA J'ai poussé jusqu'au brevet (p. 67).

The tone is reminiscent of the Bishop's in the First Tableau. He ends his adulation of the episcopal seat with 'aux chiottes la fonction', showing that he alternates between the roles of bishop and of client (p. 26). The contrast between the extended length of lyrical sentences and the curtailed length of profane phrases adds to the drama of alternation. The fundamental difference between the Bishop, and Carmen and Irma is that the latter are supposed to be themselves whereas their characters are just as inconsistent.

Parallels can be drawn between Irma's flippancy and that of Madame in *Les Bonnes*. Irma undermines the supposed concern she shows for Georges by telling him she perfumed herself whilst anticipating his arrival: 'Je suis toute remuée ; ça bouge encore. Je vous savais en route, donc en danger. Frissonnante, j'attendais... en me parfumant...' (p. 79). Madame from *Les Bonnes* is echoed strongly here. Despite saying she has renounced smoking in sympathy with Monsieur, who is incarcerated 'seul, sans nourriture, sans tabac, sans rien [...]' (p. 68) - only minutes later Madame exclaims: 'Que je fume! Une cigarette!', indicating the superficiality of her empathy and willingness to sacrifice her comforts (p. 69). Both Irma and Madame's roles as grieving lovers are

The spectator is given the impression that the list could continue *ad infinitum*. The continuity attracts the spectator's attention more than the actual description of the brothel does. The description is repetitive and sterile. The detail is not informative. For example, 'vole' becomes 'vogue' or on another occasion 'briller' becomes 'illumine', or 'bordel' becomes 'claque précieux et rose' and 'boxon sentimental' (pp. 69 & 59). Relexicalisation through synonymy prevents rhematic progression of the dialogue. The hypnotic, incantatory form of the list becomes more significant than its contents. Synonymy according to Fontanier's *Les Figures du discours* is the accumulation of words of similar meaning 'pour peindre une même idée, un même chose avec plus de force' (p. 332). But Genet's use of synonymy constitutes a gradual effacement of subject matter in favour of linguistic form. This is particularly true in theatre, where the spectator has the time only to access general impressions, and not to scrutinise every word.

Homogeneity through repetition and thematic continuity is no guarantee of the genuineness of an utterance. It suggests a proliferation of role-playing in the very same way that the staccato of constant interruption does.

Genet's exposure of speech as polyphonic ceremony has been more clearly illustrated by means of a detailed study of one isolated extract of his theatre, in this case the Fifth Tableau of *Le Balcon*. But polyphony prevails throughout Genet's plays. Yeux-Verts in *Haute surveillance* plays both bully and illiterate victim. The gangsters in *Splendid's* play both tough guys and cowards. The Pope in *Elle* plays both the eminent head of the church and a pathetic, broken man. Every character in Genet's theatre, whether overtly playing a role - Claire and Solange playing Madame in *Les Bonnes* or the Blacks playing Whites in *Les Nègres* - or not - Claire and Solange or Irma and Carmen playing themselves - is fragmented into a multitude of conflicting voices.

An emphasis on the materiality of an utterance indicates that all speech, whether it appears overtly scripted or seems quasi-spontaneous, exists within the limitations of roleplay. Characters alternate repeatedly between roles or persist in roles only to underscore further the artifice of that role. The dynamics of speech are exposed by Genet and exploited by characters who speak simultaneously in several roles, or force persons

discarded as quickly as they are assumed. This is indicated to the spectator by the sudden thematic changes.

Alternations from the important, the pressing and the poetic to the trivial, temporal and quotidian are provided conveniently by items of Irma's clothing. No matter whether the characters are discussing the revolution or matters of existential import, Irma in her chichi boudoir interjects with comments about her toilet and wardrobe, as the following examples illustrate: 'Fais ce que je t'ordonne, mais avant prends le vaporisateur' (p. 77); 'Le Chef de la Police devrait être arrivé depuis une demi-heure... [...] Donne mes bracelets, Carmen. (*A Arthur*) Et toi vaporise' (p. 77). Irma changes the subject from the seriousness of the revolution or from dissent within the brothel to the banality of her clothing. Theatrical effects created by the constant change of theme to Irma's clothes incidentally do not feature in the 1956 version of *Le Balcon*. Genet evidently adds clothes as convenient interrupting devices.

Peter Brook writes of his admiration for the seamless alternation between the sacred and the profane in Shakespeare's works:

His theatre does not vulgarise the spiritual to make it easier for the common man to assimilate, nor does it reject the dirt, the ugliness, the violence, the absurdity and the laughter of base existence. It slides effortlessly between the two, moment by moment, while in its grand forward thrust it intensifies the developing experience until all resistance explodes.¹

Genet's combination of the 'spiritual' and the 'vulgar' is similar to that of Shakespeare. Like in Shakespeare's theatre the opposites, drawn from multifarious sources, do not become indiscernible. Instead they co-exist. The effect of this dual presence is to my mind however diametrically opposed in the theatres of Genet and Shakespeare, or at least in the Brookian reading of Shakespeare. There is nothing 'seamless' or effortless about Genet's alternations. Whereas Shakespeare's juxtapositions of prose and verse, noble and vile, tragic and comic, create a synthesis that abolishes the apparent Manichaeian dichotomy of opposites, Genet maintains resistance between these oppositions, creating a jarring discordance that interrupts, fragments and disconcerts. Unlike Brook, or Brook's interpretation of Shakespeare, Genet does not reach any universal or cosmological truth through the juxtaposition of opposites. For that matter, no truth remains at all in Genet's theatre. Content is sapped so that the signifier, the opposition, is perceived more than the

¹ *There are No Secrets*, p. 86.

thematic content of the juxtaposed parts. Oscillation between voices, costumes and themes does not reveal an integral, complete person. As Paul Auster writes in the epigraph to this chapter, the fragments that constitute our lives, the contradictory roles that we play, cannot be synthesised into any coherent, transcendental superstructure.

The effect of these sudden moments of thematic volte-face is an abrupt shift from the lyrical to the prosaic, the titillating to the mundane. In addition to interruptions in set, acoustics and tone, Genet thus interrupts dialogue content. The non-verbal device of self-interruption, be it verbal, paraverbal or non-verbal, itself signifies in excess of verbal content, for thematic meaning is disrupted, preventing linear plot and character development. Genet thus embeds meaning in the mechanics of role-swapping.

(vii) Repetition and Continuity

I have demonstrated the manifestation through truncation, whether non-verbal, paraverbal or verbally tropological, of roleplay in Genet's theatre. However, artifice is illustrated by continuity as well as interruption. I analyse this effect.

In *Pour une grammaire textuelle* Bernard Combette outlines his study of communicational dynamism through an analysis of the *thème*, information with which the person addressed is already familiar, and the *rhème*, new information. The *rhème* advances communication more than the *theme*, and is thus higher in what Combette terms the *communicational dynamism hierarchy*. I have shown how Genet indicates changes in role through thematic interruption. By the same token, he employs an unrelenting concatenation of themes to denote the instances when characters remain in a role for a sustained period. But an extended amount of time spent in one role does not reduce the rift between the role and the player. Genet underscores the artifice of roleplay even when one role is played uninterrupted by the same character. For Combette the rule of thumb for the *theme* is to ask the question 'Quoi d'autre sur le même sujet?'¹. Characters in the Fifth tableau provide endless information 'sur le même sujet' in their tirades. Deictic devices such as the anaphora and cataphora, and an almost obsessive hypnotic use of accumulation serve as syntactical structures which provide 'more of the

¹ Bernard Combette, *Pour une grammaire textuelle* (Paris: J. Duculot, 1983), p. 44.

same' information¹. In the following example anaphoric omissions link two elements of differing status:

IRMA Voyons, Carmen, quand tu montais sur le rocher couvert de neige et d'un
 du reste - rosier fleuri en papier jaune - que je vais devoir remiser à la cave,
 et que le miraculé s'évanouissait à ton apparition (p. 56).

The snow and rosebush are concatenated to the rock, and the actions of climbing onto the rock and fainting are concatenated to 'quand'. Continuity instead of interruption is achieved, as Irma sustains the role of *raconteur*. Concatenation of this type is employed repeatedly by Genet, to enhance the idea of persistence in one role.

I have illustrated how conjunctions of contrast signal an interruption in the utterance. Conjunctions of co-ordination however link endless details to create incessant lists. Carmen for example paints a picture of prostitute life for Irma:

CARMEN [...] si une seule fois vous mettiez la robe et le voile bleu, *ou* si vous étiez la pénitente dégrafée, *ou* la jument du Général, *ou* la paysanne culbutée dans la paille [...] *Ou* la soubrette en tablier rose, l'archiduchesse dépucelée par le gendarme, *ou...* etc. (p. 56)².

Genet saps the content of Carmen's dialogue, so that the materiality of accumulation signifies in excess of thematic or semantic content. The sustained period for which Carmen holds down one role is no guarantee of the sincerity of her words.

Characters repeat the same theme endlessly by means of synonymy. They consequently fail to advance into another semantic field. Irma for example provides nothing short of an inventory of the contents of her establishment:

CARMEN: [...] J'ai coupé les amarres. Elle vole. Ou si tu veux, elle vogue dans le ciel où elle m'emporte avec elle [...] tout s'envole : lustres, miroirs, tapis, pianos, cariatides et mes salons, mes célèbres salons : le salon dit des Foins, tendu de scènes rustiques, le salon des Tortures, éclaboussé de sang et de larmes, le salon-salle du Trône drapé de velours fleurdelysé etc.[...] (p. 66).

¹ Anne Herschberg Pierrot gives the following definition of anaphora: 'Il est fréquent qu'un segment d'énoncé (en général un pronom ou un syntagme défini ou démonstratif) nécessite, pour être interprété, le recours à un segment précédent du texte' (*Stylistique de la prose* (Paris: Belin, 1993), p. 236). And she gives this definition of cataphora: 'La *cataphore* est un phénomène complémentaire mais non symétrique de l'anaphore [...] Elle consiste en ce qu'un segment d'énoncé nécessite, pour être interprété, le recours au cotexte subséquent' (p. 238). Pierre Fontanier gives this definition of accumulation: 'Figure par laquelle, au lieu d'un trait simple et unique sur le même sujet, on en réunit, sous un seul point de vue, un plus ou moins grand nombre, d'où résulte un tableau plus ou moins riche, plus ou moins étendu' (*Les Figures du discours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), p. 363). As I explain, Genet's use of accumulation has the opposite effect: it paints a more imprecise, equivocal picture.

² My italics.

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addressed into other roles in an attempt to inscribe their own utterances to some extent with singularity. But we must not forget that this is theatre. Communication therefore takes place ultimately between the theatrical production and the audience. I examine the consequences on the spectator of Genet's theatre of polyphony.

III. Addressing the Spectator

In theatre a supplementary layer is added to the elaborate fabric of polyphony. The tripartite speaker comprising speaker-L - the physical producer of the sounds; speaker- λ - the subject at the source of the speech acts; and the speech acts themselves, is further multiplied in theatre. A loose structure of interpenetrating polyphonic layers, a 'chaîne d'émetteurs/récepteurs, [...] un emboîtement d'instances énonciatives', as Kerbrat-Orecchioni describes, is in operation¹. The speaker-L is fissured into at least two speaker- λ 's at the outset, because the actors play parts. Moreover, the double speaker- λ is met by an additional person addressed, the audience. A play is not a play without an audience, and the audience is the actual intended person addressed. A person addressed on stage 'ne constitue en fait qu'un destinataire secondaire, cependant que le véritable allocutaire est en réalité celui qui a en apparence le statut de destinataire indirect', writes Kerbrat-Orecchioni (pp. 49-50). Any principal person addressed on stage is but a pretext for the real person addressed, the spectator. This intricate polyphonic network is embedded in the overall utterance, that of the dramatist. The characters' speech acts are a pretext for the perlocutionary force exercised by the dramatist on the audience. What is the perlocution behind Genet's dramatic utterance? Plot and characterisation are fragmented and sapped of content. But does the fragmentation in itself communicate a message?

In her study of myth, ritual, ceremony and celebration in Genet, Monique Borie writes 'le temps de la représentation se veut le moment privilégié d'une véritable régénération individuelle et collective' (p. 12). The concept of theatre providing a salvational rejuvenation of the individual and effecting the reinsertion of that individual

¹ Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 'Pour une approche pragmatique du dialogue théâtral', *L'Écriture théâtrale*, 41 (March 1984), p. 48.

into the community is upheld by Artaud and The Living Theater. I return briefly to the dramaturgies of Artaud, The Living Theater and Brook in order to discuss the special qualities of Genet's message to the real person addressed, the audience. Contrary to what Borie might say, and contrary to what Artaud and his followers intend with their theatres, Genet's message is of individual, and not collective regeneration.

(i) Theatre and Community: Artaud, The Living Theater, Brook and Genet

As I have illustrated, the emphasis on the non-verbal materiality of scenic language in Genet's theatre is axiomatic. For Artaud and his collection of mystic disciples an emphasis on the non-verbal in theatre enables unequivocal, universal expression. Artaud wishes for stage and auditorium to be enveloped in one rhythm so as to share the same indisputable transcendental truth. According to Artaud and his school, implicit in the notion of theatre are social and political intent. For Artaud the concept of *culture* is associated with a sense of community, and social and political commitment. Artaud was briefly involved with the Surrealist movement, for which a new level of semantic pertinence and the location of real, genuine sense born of the destruction of conventional associations, was to engender a new world order. In his 'Le Théâtre de Séraphin' Artaud calls for *art* to be usurped by *culture*. Whereas art is lazy and unserviceable, characterised by 'cette idée de charme inutile, de jeu gratuit et fugace', culture implies social and political regeneration¹. Art is useless, culture is functional. Art entertains, culture remedies social ills. Art is the expression of one person, culture the expression of all peoples. Art separates, culture unites. The generation of one unifying and universal rhythm for Artaud is the only means by which we can rescue ourselves from the banalisation of defunct and obsolete rituals. For The Living Theater the community of the theatrical audience is also the site of political regeneration. It upholds the Artaudian belief that society has brought about a systematic degradation of rituals. The restoration of true meaning to actions within the theatre effects authentic action beyond the auditorium. In an interview with J.J. Lebel a member remarks 'qu'est-ce qu'une pièce de théâtre? C'est l'effort communautaire d'un groupe d'individus naufragés, se noyant et essayant de se sauver les uns les autres.'² This shared sense of consideration towards

¹ 'Le Théâtre de Séraphin', p. 281.

² *Entretiens avec le Living Theatre*, p. 287.

others within the theatre is translated into committed political action and social responsibility outside the theatre. Resonances of a desire for unification in a common theatrical experience are also apparent in Brook. In *There are No Secrets* he writes of the drum beat of mutual experience that unites stage and auditorium in one common rhythm, and of the community spirit aroused by theatre (p. 46):

The chaos that could come from each individual realising his own secret world must be unified into a shared experience. In other words, the aspect of reality that the performer is evoking must call up a response within the same area in each spectator so that for an instant the audience lives one collective impression (p. 82).

The appeal of the material is universal, according to Brook. For him, unequivocalness is embodied in a theatrical performance that emphasises the non-verbal. For Genet a universal exists, but it could not be further removed from Brook's frankly positivist and tyrannical propositions.

For Artaud, Brook and The Living Theater a play must constitute a communal epiphany. It must unify the spectators in a common understanding that reaches beyond the limits of the theatrical production, and must culminate in political action. Gaëton Picon criticises the 1949 production of Genet's *Haute surveillance* by saying 'aucune oeuvre, n'est plus dénuée de cette préoccupation de l'universalité qui semble inséparable des grandes oeuvres.'¹ Genet's theatre is frequently criticised for its lack of a coherent message that unites spectators. Is his work devoid of a message beyond its own artistic creation? It is true that for Genet the appearance of an act carries more import than any 'function' it might perform, to use both his and Artaud's term. However, does this mean that Genet is an unashamed aesthete?

A critic of *Le Balcon* writes 'la pièce est bizzarrement construite en morceaux qui s'articulent difficilement'². And another writes: 'C'est quand même une pièce mal fichue, redondante, qui s'égare en même temps que tous ces personnages, perdus dans leur image reflétée par les mille miroirs de Madame Irma.'³ This critic goes on to complain that the characters fail to generate the empathy we feel for a Hamlet or an Ophelia. If the elaboration of rounded, integral characters is the principal aim of a play,

¹ Gaëton Picon, *Panorama de la nouvelle littérature française*, quoted by Edmund White, *Jean Genet*, p. 363.

² Guy Demur, 'Genet le voleur de mots', *Nouvel Observateur*, 2 January 1986.

³ Colette Godard, 'Les Mille miroirs de l'illusion : *Le Balcon* à l'Odéon', *Le Monde*, 15th May 1990.

then Genet falls short of success. If as Bernard Combette states in *Pour une grammaire textuelle* the principal dimension of a text is its functional ability to communicate new information, then Genet's texts fail on the level of diegetic progression and cohesive dialectical exegesis¹. But does this mean that Genet is incapable of formulating any coherent message at all? Philip Thody accuses Genet of contributing to 'liberal cancer'. He views Genet's theatre as pirouetting away from genuine, sincere violence and confrontation between revolutionary and despot, authority and criminal, Black and White. He accuses Genet of avant-garde formalism. He sees nothing beyond the immediacy of Genet's fragmented poetic moments.

A man who dedicated over half his life to what at the time were radical causes such as the armed emancipation of the Blacks in the USA and Palestinian liberation, can hardly be labelled an armchair liberal. But even this is not the point. From a dramatic perspective *Le Balcon* is admittedly Genet's least successful play. Nevertheless, to criticise its fragmentation, its discordant articulation between scenes and its unconvincing characterisation, is to miss the point entirely. As Regnault describes in my opening quotation to this chapter, Genet's polyphony is 'la plus savante'. The fragmentation of the play is not gratuitous aestheticism. Genet's theatre is not the diversion Artaud condemns *art* of being. There is a clear purpose for his transgression of the norms of plot and character development. Genet's deliberate deconstruction of character through the emphasis on role alternation, that takes the place of character development, enables his theatre to go further than the superficiality and temporality of anecdote and politics, and to convey a wholly universal message. Irma, Carmen, Arthur and Georges are spectres in a roleplay that haunts the stage. But our existence is no different, and herein lies the universality of Genet's perlocution. In *L'Etrange mot d'...* he writes 'la politique, l'histoire, les démonstrations psychologiques classiques, le divertissement du soir lui-même devront céder la place à quelque chose de plus, je ne sais comment dire, mais de plus étincelant.'² *Le Balcon* is not a satire of '*ceci ou de cela*', insists Genet³. Were *Le Balcon* exclusively a condemnation of power and politics, the satire would be situated only at the level of content. *Le Balcon* and for that matter all

¹ Combette, p. 11.

² Jean Genet, *L'Etrange mot d'...*, in *Les Nègres au Port de la lune*, p. 171.

³ 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*', p. 12.

Genet's plays are satires of their own intrinsic properties, of their own signs. Barthes's main criticism of Peter Brook's production of *Le Balcon* is that it is too literal, and consequently fails to capitalise on self-reflexiveness. 'C'est un Théâtre qui veut bien tout jouer, sauf se jouer lui-même', writes Barthes¹. Genet's plays are satires of the power of the sign, of ritual and ceremony that compose our lives.

Genet admires the manner in which Rembrandt strips all costume, anecdote, time and place from his later portraits in an attempt to study and represent the essential properties of human identity. He writes of the great painter: '*Défaire le sujet de ce qu'il a d'anecdotique et le placer sous une lumière d'éternité. [...] Un tableau de Rembrandt non seulement arrête le temps qui faisait le sujet s'écouler dans le futur, mais il le fait remonter aux plus hautes époques.*'² Rembrandt removes extra-textual reference. His paintings therefore attain a universal significance, for they are freed from temporal connotation. When Thody criticises Genet for his self-conscious playing with form, in my opinion he fails to see that Genet's fragmented whirligigs - produced by the interruptions and truncations I have described - add up to a philosophy in their own right. The meaning of Genet's plays is embodied in this fragmentation. Picon accuses Genet of failing to treat universals. The constant syntagmatic interruption of form to which I have alluded paradigmatically fragments the characters into innumerable multiform and sundry facets. Genet thus opposes his characters to the deceptively immovable inherency of naturalist subjects, and in turn comments on the myriad influences that shape our personalities. In her role as 'mère maquerele' Irma might at first appear to be the director of the events at the Grand Balcon. But we realise that she is a mere actor, frenziedly switching parts. 'Je ne me permets même pas, *moi (Elle appuie sur ce mot.)* même pas de dire les clients', exclaims Irma. But who is this 'moi' (p. 55)³? Is it Irma the pimp, or is it Irma the book-keeper, or else Irma the loyal friend and confidante, or Irma the lover, or Irma the pimp-playing-at-being-one-of-the-prostitutes...? She seems to be prey to a cunning mind driven by a diabolical force. That force is society, and we are all prey to its powers. To speak is to recite its lines. Genet unites the spectators in a common truth that the disjointed characters and events, the puppet-like, laboured beings

¹ Roland Barthes, 'Le Balcon de Genet, Mise en scène de Peter Brook au Théâtre du Gymnase', *Théâtre populaire*, 38 (1960) pp. 96-98.

² Genet's italics, 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt', p. 23.

³ Genet's italics.

redemption carries its own limitations.

IV. Mobility and the Mask

(i) Polyphonic Shifting and Mobile Identity

‘Je suis comme n’importe qui, essentiellement changeant’, says Genet in an interview¹. The non-essentialism of the role affords the mobility for reconfiguration. Artaud, Brook and The Living Theater call for a release from the fixity of discursive representation, but paradoxically bind both play and audience to the didacticism of one single shared experience, one ‘response within the same area in each spectator’, in Brook’s words. Beyond the disparate facts that constitute Genet’s world there lies only a metaphorical *vide*. In other words there lies nothing, no alternative. Genet does not offer redemption beyond the fragmentation of discursive social roleplay, but he offers redemption for himself, his characters and his spectators, through it. Metaphor is our master, but Genet gives us the capacity to master metaphor. He refuses the closure of ceremony by bestowing upon his characters the liberty to shift from role to role as I have illustrated in this chapter. In turn he endows the audience with salvation through empowerment. Each spectator can trace his or her meandering route through the polyphonic layers and interweaving roles represented by the characters on stage.

In just the same way that no signifier-signified relationship is sacred, nobody is the sacred proprietor of a role. Claudine Olivier conducts an experiment whereby characters’ names are erased to leave only the text². She discovers that even when dialogue is written in one uninterrupted monological sequence, the intervention of a new speaker is often detectable, owing to the specificity of each character’s dialogue. Were this technique applied to Genet’s plays, it would be relatively simple to locate the intervention of a new speaker because of Genet’s use of interruption. It would however be practically impossible to detect which character it was. The roles themselves are fixed, but they play host to a multiplicity of occupiers. Genet is known to have cut up his texts, less as an exercise in the powers of the arbitrary in the manner of William Burroughs’ cut-out, and more as a way in which to pass dialogues from one character to another. An examination of the various versions of *Le Balcon* reveals that dialogue is

¹ ‘Par lui-même’, p. 28.

² Claudine Olivier, paper given at Université de Toulouse - Le Mirail, May 1995.

on stage are no less false, no less a product of society's conflicting forces than they themselves are. There are no degrees of falsity. The spectator must accept that his or her identity is as much a cross-hatching of society's sketches as Irma's or Arthur's. By perceiving coherence on a macro-level, after characterisation, plot or dialectical philosophical reasoning have been fragmented, we realise that Genet's works flash the brilliance of eternal universality, and can surely be embraced back into the body of great works from which Picon expelled it. Through the use of polyphonic shifting and compulsive roleplay every movement made and word uttered on Genet's stage concerns the universal notion that our fractured identities are constructed through ceremony and artifice. On the train journey described in 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt' Genet writes: 'derrière ce qui était visible de cet homme, [...] je découvris [...] une sorte d'identité universelle à tous les hommes' (p. 22). Pascal's *moi* is still *haïssable*. The classical *homme éternel* is still favoured, but he/she is not integral. Instead we are all, without exception, as much a product of social discourses as Genet's characters are a product of his artistic creation. The Chief of Police says: 'dans ce somptueux théâtre, où à chaque minute se joue un drame - comme dans le monde' (p. 83). Genet exposes the theatricality of both theatre and life. His work is a striking metaphor of the human condition. If theatre is about universality and truth, then Genet is its greatest playwright.

(ii) *The Utterance and the Vide*

In *Traité de stylistique française I* Bally alludes to emptiness with reference to intonation. In *How to do Things with Words* Austin exposes the concept of the void in the context of performativity. I allude to these concepts of the void and emptiness with respect to Genet's own notion of the *vide*. Genet's stylisation of form takes place at the expense of content. Beyond the surface of utterances in Genet's theatre lies a *vide* of hollow gestures and empty words.

An emphasis on form empties the utterance of content. In *Traité de stylistique française I* Charles Bally explains that the affirmation of intonation in speech diverts attention from semantic content. The word then becomes a receptacle for any category of feelings (pp. 271-274). 'Sacredieu!' for example is an exclamation that has nothing to do with God's holiness. Genet's constant modification of intonation draws attention not to

the semantic or thematic content of utterances, but to their form, their materiality. Substance is sapped and surface is sovereign.

Austin explains that a performative utterance cannot be referred to in terms of truth and falsity. Instead, Austin places utterances under the scrutiny of what he terms appropriacy. I clarify this gloss. If the procedure of appropriacy is not completely and correctly respected by all interlocutors, an 'infelicity' takes place. This is either when an utterance misfires, its performance failing to take effect, or else through abuse of the procedure of appropriacy. The two situations differ in that in the former performance is obviated because the circumstances are inopportune, whilst in the second the performance takes place, but in bad faith because the speaker is not the proprietor of the requisite feelings, thoughts or intentions. The second form of infelicity is therefore void according to Austin, and is described as an 'infraction' (pp. 14-15).

Le Balcon provides an endless string of infractions. Just a handful of examples from the Fifth Tableau alone include the moment when Irma sends Arthur out in search of the Chief of Police in the knowledge that he has already arrived safe and well; when Irma expresses surprise at the sound of the doorbell when she herself rang it so Carmen would leave the room; when Irma intends the Sainte Thérèse roleplay for Carmen, but has already promised it to Régine (pp. 79, 84 & 63). These are overt examples of disrespectful speech acts. I argue however that each and every speech act in *Le Balcon* and across Genet's theatre is an infraction. Characters are capable of speaking only in terms of roleplay. They are consequently never the proprietors of the requisite feelings, thoughts or intentions, to borrow Austin's words. Their utterances are never anything but infelicitous. In just the same way that Irma's prostitutes are 'longues stériles' that will never bear children, so the speech acts in the play are barren and will never develop into genuine action (p. 58). The perlocutionary force of Carmen's utterance implies that she wants to see her daughter, but she never goes. She speaks of marriage, but can never advance past the vapid images of bouquets and veils. Georges has a world domination plan but it goes no further than wanting to see his image immortalised in the 'Maison d'illusions'. In Chapter Two I air my suspicions as to whether the revolutionary partisan Roger actually realises the act of castrating himself, or whether he merely goes through the motions of miming the gesture. To my mind in Genet's theatre performativity is

never fleshed out by actual performance. His own expression of an ‘architecture de vide et de mots’ comes into its own¹. Perlocution is an infraction, intentions are false, words are empty. The theatre is of course an ideal location in which to expose Genet’s concept of empty performativity. An added layer of hollowness is inevitable in all theatrical perlocution because all utterances are quasi-utterances recited by an actor, and all performance is the quasi-performance of drama. By stylising polyphony in the manners described in this chapter Genet underscores the concept of roleplay and shows all actions and words to be nothing more an adherence to type.

The characters are trapped in a hamster wheel, where advancement through authentic performance is unrealisable, as Carmen indicates: ‘A peine fini, il faut tout recommencer. [...] Tout recommencer, et toujours la même aventure’ (p. 64). In the first version of the play Arthur’s exit and Georges’ entry do not overlap². The modification that we see in the final version augments the image of a perpetual cycle of repeated, empty performativity that fails to advance into the performance of actual action. Genet not only shows the spectator that the cyclical motion of power whereby two thousand years of Christian imperialism is merely replaced with a sacrilegious, sex-crazed tyrant for the next two millennia, but he redefines all human activity as being the empty repetition of established actions.

There is however a tension throughout Genet’s theatre between the inescapability of roleplay and the liberation from inherent identity. Through stylisation of polyphony Genet prioritises performativity over actual performance. His exaggeration of the signifier hollows out semantic content and real intention, exposing a void of inauthenticity behind every word his characters utter. But the fact that acts and words are not the proprietors of intrinsic entities can be capitalised upon. In my last chapter I demonstrated how he exploits the relativism of the relationship between the signifier and the signified to his own end. The non-sacred relationship of the role to the subject affords the freedom to assume or reject roles. The fixity of the mask is compensated for by the mobility of shifting between masks. I explore this area with reference to polyphony, indicating how mobility offers a certain redemptive liberation for the part of the characters and the spectator, from the limitations of discursive dictate, but that this

¹ *Les Nègres*, p. 122.

² *Le Balcon*, 1956, Cinquième tableau.

sometimes handed indiscriminately from one character to another¹. Arthur's lines from the first version are given to Irma in the second, for example. Characters' utterances, like everything else in Genet's world, are relative and readily available for reconfiguration².

The very make-up of conversation allows for a certain limited liberty. The potential to manipulate speech acts afforded by the communicational trope and the consequent reversal of the information hierarchy that I have described, constitute a rhythmic tension between fixed adherence to established forms and fluid shifting between forms. Characters take on new roles and force their speech partners into new roles. The speaker's perlocution and the person addressed's reception are modified constantly. This polyphonic shifting generates a certain dynamism within stasis. In his 'Communication ou transmission' François Rastier speaks of speech acts in terms of a 'flux'³. He writes:

Quoi qu'il en soit, le message diffère pour l'émetteur et le récepteur. Il n'est pas perçu de la même façon, car il n'est pas soumis au même régime de pertinence : la différence des intentions entraîne celle des saillances dans le flux de l'action communicative en cours.⁴

The unpredictability of the utterance's reception by the person addressed and the unpredictability of the speaker's perlocution are a source of mobility. Communication consists in a constantly modifiable flux of performative intention and performative reception. A dynamic emerges between regulated norms of discourse and the arbitrariness of praxis. 'Tu es folle. Ou tu joues à le devenir', says the Chief of Police to Irma in the first version of *Le Balcon* (p. 100). Being is becoming. Identity is not the fixity of the image. It is the shifting between images. Form is a synchro-diachronic system of signs that permits us to reconcile continuity with discontinuity. Relativity leads to instability, flux, movement. Genet disrupts the predictable stereotypes of bishop, judge, general, pimp and prostitute with the unpredictable swapping of type.

Theatre as a medium is an ideal choice of location for Genet to expose the

¹ The same applies to *Les Paravents*, where for example Warda picks her teeth with hat pins in the revised version, whereas it is Malika in the first.

² Genet's 'cutout'-style activity also debunks the idea of plot linearity. From one version of *Le Balcon* to the next the sequence of events in any one tableau can change dramatically. Certain parts of the first section of the Fifth Tableau are put into the second section of the 1956 version. In addition, what is Arthur's entry in the last edition, is Georges' in the first (1956, Sixième tableau).

³ François Rastier, 'Communication ou transmission?', paper given at Université de Toulouse - Le Mirail, February 1996.

⁴ 'Communication ou transmission?'

contradictory fixity and mobility of roleplay. Theatre is simultaneously written and oral, static and mobile. The theatrical text is fixed and definitive before the play's production, but input by the director, set and costume designers, actors, *et al* can never be programmed in advance. In addition, the speaker/person addressed dynamic is not dissimilar to that between spectacle and audience. Brook explains how the audience's reaction constantly modifies the performance: 'within your silence is hidden an intensifier that sends your own private emotion back across our space, subtly encouraging me, amending my way of speech.'¹ The actors' preparation of intonation, tempo, rhythm and gesture will never preclude the uniqueness of each performance. There is a rhythmic fluctuation between line-reciting and the unpredictable arbitrariness and spontaneous improvisation of the spoken word.

Oscillation between puppet-like line recital and sudden interruption, between 'rictus' and the 'sourire', between adherence and transgression of type, is a source of movement in Genet's theatre (p. 75)². Verbal and non-verbal truncation and modification of intonation clearly contribute towards the generation of this staccato rhythm.

(ii) The Spectator's Role in the Roleplay

Unlike Brook, Artaud, *et al* Genet does not intend his theatre to have social or political repercussions. But his theatre nonetheless empowers the spectator. Genet refers to this emancipation of the spectator as a revolution, but is quick to distinguish his revolution from socio-political intention:

Ce qu'on appelle révolutions poétiques ou artistiques ne sont pas exactement des révolutions. Je ne crois pas qu'elles changent l'ordre du monde. Elles ne changent pas non plus la vision qu'on a du monde. Elles affinent la vision, elles la complètent, elles la rendent plus complexe, mais elles ne la transforment pas du tout au tout, comme une révolution sociale ou politique.³

Genet makes the spectator complicit in the theatrical creation because the highly volatile polyphonic status of the speech acts means the perlocutions must be traced constantly

¹ *There are No Secrets*, p. 80. Brook's comment clearly contradicts his desire for a universal, unequivocal theatrical experience. This discrepancy in his argument is typical of his works.

² In his '*Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert*' Genet states that he would prefer puppets to human actors in his theatre, indicating his wish for a certain stasis interrupted by mobility. Carmen points to the difference between the 'natural' air of a smile - 'sourire' - and the fixed, mask-like aspect of the grimace - 'rictus'. This comparison is not included in the first edition of the play.

³ 'Par lui-même', p. 27.

back to their origins, and the principal and secondary persons addressed must be located. A comparison between the 1956 and 1962 versions of *Le Balcon* reveals definite modifications to Genet's dramatic style. Polyphonic shifting is clearly a more prominent feature in the later version. Admittedly the last three tableaux of the revised edition become confused and lose dramatic impact, but the much more minimal plot of the first six tableaux of the second version allows Genet's characters to drift from role to role even more, without losing the spectator. Simplicity of anecdote and paring down of superfluous dialogue allows for a highly complex web of polyphonic shiftings, into which the spectator is woven¹.

If reconfiguration is performativity, then the ultimate perlocution is committed by Genet, who incites the spectator to take a bank clerk for a bishop, or a male prostitute for a hangman. But Genet's choice of the theatrical medium will cleverly forever protect him against ideological didacticism. His performativity can never become actual performance because the theatrical act by implication is make-believe and in any case no act is authentic, genuine, real. Genet's speech acts are void in Austin's sense of the word, for they will not start a revolution. They exist in terms of empty gestures and words. But out of the potentially desperate human condition is born a certain optimism, for Genet's perlocution achieves the abolition of monolithism through the facilitation of a multiplicity of audience receptions and reactions. In *The Empty Space* Brook sees the director's task as being the synthesis of the kaleidoscopic movement of ever-shifting devices on stage into an unequivocally unified whole: 'it is in accepting the prism as a whole that its meanings emerge' (p. 89). The only coherence Genet allows his spectators is that of incoherence. Ideology is fractured by the extremely complex multiple views of the audience. Each member is a person addressed with his or her own power to exploit the communicational trope and to reverse the information hierarchy owing to the plurality of polyphonic layers that Genet stages. Each member of the audience can listen to a different polyphonic voice, each can paint a slightly different picture. The spectator's voice is no longer excluded. Instead, it becomes an added polyphonic layer. Genet's

¹ Irrelevant banter about the cost of plumbers for example is removed from the second version. In addition much ontological argumentation is represented semiotically through set and costume in the second version. For example, Irma's clothes are used to illustrate the juxtaposition of the sacred with the profane to which I allude in this chapter. These attempts at simplification allow Genet to render his polyphonic networks to become even more complex, without losing the spectator irretrievably.

theatre does not incite social repercussions outside its walls, but it nevertheless encourages a certain redemption from the prosaism of hackneyed art forms through the involvement of the spectator in the poetic creation.

The freedom afforded by relativity is to my mind mitigated by a certain disadvantage. The price paid for individual reconfiguration is solitude. In his review of the film *Les Pâtres du désordre* directed by Nikos Papatakis, Genet describes the movement from frame to frame: 'images singulières au deux sens du mot : singulières c'est-à-dire seules, isolées dans le récit, singulières c'est-à-dire vivant chacune sa propre beauté. Mais chaque image, bousculée par la précédente, en bouscule une autre.'¹ Papatakis's frames interrupt each other in a manner reminiscent of Genet's sets and dialogues. The frames in Papatakis's film are fixed in their beauty, only to be erased by the beauty of the ensuing scene, reminiscent of Genet's characters each fixed in their roles, but moving into another role. Papatakis's frames are alone, because no unifying theme synthesises them. Genet's characters are also alone, and so too are his spectators.

V. Conclusion: Performativity and Solitude

For Genet we are all united in the common knowledge that authentic exchange is an impossibility. 'Je suis, avec tout homme, seul', says Genet in a television interview². Genet tells his Moroccan biographer Mohamed Choukri that he has never experienced real closeness with another human being³. And he writes the following words to his tightrope walker protégé in *Le Funambule*: 'la solitude, je te l'ai dit ne saurait t'être accordée que par la présence du public' (p. 21). The presence of others just exacerbates the sense of solitude, for reciprocal exchange is impossible. In addition, theatre as a medium exaggerates solitude through its truncation of communication. The spectator is silenced by theatrical convention. The spectator is a 'témoin indiscret' who 'hante l'espace scénique', in Kerbrat-Orecchioni's words, but does nothing to communicate⁴. Genet's theatre describes mutual relations and exchange between individuals as impossible, both on and off stage.

¹ Jean Genet, 'Les Pâtres du désordre' in *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 33.

² Jean Genet, Documentary by Michel Van Zele, 1995.

³ Mohamed Choukri, *Jean Genet in Tangier* (New York: Ecco Press, 1974), p. 67.

⁴ *Pour une approche pragmatique du dialogue théâtrale*, p. 49.

The musical term antiphony describes two separate choirs who respond to each other in an echo-style dynamic. The utterances of Genet's characters by-pass each other, leaving the speaker standing alone and without response. Characters' dialogues collide and erase each other in the same way that Papatakis's frames do. Individuals occupy the same space, and yet real exchange is always forestalled and characters stand alone in their separate solitudes. Whilst to my mind Ionesco's characters simply recite lines over and over like scratched records and he affords only himself creative redemption through his manipulation of language to numerous humorous ends, Genet affords both his characters and spectators a relatively redemptive opportunity to transgress fixed rules by exegetical manipulating their own and others' utterances. But this act in no way serves to enhance exchange between individuals.

My study of polyphony in this chapter has been local in its approach. But the use of the signifier I have illustrated in the Fifth Tableau of *Le Balcon* is of global significance to Genet's dramatic oeuvre. I have attempted to show how polyphony precludes antiphony. Genet's use of the non-verbal devices of truncation and polyphonic manipulation elucidated in this chapter highlight the isolation of one speaker from another. Characters truncate each other's utterances repeatedly, through non-verbal, paraverbal and verbal interruption, consequently obviating communication. They reverse the communicational hierarchy by exploiting the tropological potential in speech. They manipulate each other's speech acts, forcing their interlocutors into roles. Conversations do not intersect. Utterances are interrupted, fissured and deconstructed by eclectic and disruptive sets of individualistic perlocutionary forces. Instead of reacting respectfully to the initiations of other speakers' utterances, characters initiate their own agendas. Artaud speaks of community in theatre. In his 'Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert' Genet speaks of a sense of communion he wishes to instil in his audience. Like Artaud, Brook and The Living Theater Genet generates a collective consciousness, but it is far from the Artaudian communal feeling of understanding that leads to a sense of social and political duty. Beckett's Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov ultimately support each other and understand each other's suffering. But Genet unites his spectators in the common knowledge that we are all alone.

I have shown how the relationship between the signifier and the signified enables the non-essentialism of the role. The signifier is like a dress, that determines the outer appearance of any wearer. This has led me to illustrate Genet's use of the modification of intonation, metacommentary and thematic interruption to denote the shifting of role. From the point of view of the spectator the duality of the fissured speaker- λ becomes theatrical, as the spectator must accept one character in many roles. Each spectator's voice is added to the elaborate polyphonic network via an interrogation of the origins and destinations of speech acts. Exclusion is avoided owing to the democratisation of spectator interpretations. The consequence however is solitude. In 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt' Genet writes: 'aucun homme n'était mon frère : chaque homme était moi-même, mais isolé, temporairement, dans son écorce particulière' (p. 27). Genet upholds the universality of human experience, but this universality does not unite. Discursive form, image, surface, roleplay give form to our lives, but we are separated irreconcilably from each other. Each 'écorce', each role is a release of vitality and mobility, owing to the 'temporary' nature of each role. Yet each role, like every image is a mortification and an isolation. Genet explains in *Le Funambule* how the subject is complicit with one thing alone. Not a speech partner, nor a spectator with whom a sense of community might be shared, but the image:

Narcisse danse? Mais c'est d'autre chose que de coquetterie, d'égoïsme qu'il s'agit. Si c'était de la Mort elle-même? Danse donc seul. Pâle, livide, anxieux de plaire ou de déplaire à ton image : or, c'est ton image qui va danser pour toi (p. 13).

The artiste must not play to the gallery, but this is not an existentialist desire to flee the constricting gaze of the other. The tightrope walker, like Irma, like Carmen, like Georges and every character in Genet's theatre and like us, leads a solitary existence within the isolation of form. The Bishop in *Le Balcon* explains that the shiny surface of the underside of his robes reflects his legs: 'Chape dorée surtout, tu me gardes du monde. Où sont mes jambes, où sont mes bras? Sous tes pans moirés, glacés' (p. 28). We all exist within a carapace of form and ritual that isolates us from others, according to Genet. Form is the tightrope between solitude caused by the vapid repetition of meaningless rituals in which we are all stuck, and more solitude caused by a transgression of the rules, that is misunderstood by others.

We exist within the confines of codification. Genet suggests a recourse, but simultaneously celebrates its failure. Genet's is self-conscious anti-theatre, a catharsis in reverse, a potlatch that creates, celebrates and destroys itself. Through fragmentation nothing happens in Genet's theatre, and nothing is said: such is the basis of his affirmation of life.

*

This chapter has illustrated the tension between stasis and mobility in Genet's concept of the role. My next chapter points to a similar fixity and fluidity of form, as I look at Genet's use of textual rhythmic structures.

Chapter Five

Rhythmic Structures and Incantation: Non-Essentialism as Essence

Genet's verbal texts are constructed around an exoskeleton of disparate rhythmic structures. Maria Casarès, who plays the part of La Mère in Blin's production of *Les Paravents*, states that Genet instructed his actors to let themselves be transported by the 'mouvement de la phrase.'¹ In this chapter I underscore the specificity of this 'mouvement', of textual elements systematised and stylised into rhythmic structures.

Tahar Ben Jelloun encapsulates the unique tensions afforded by verbal rhythms in Genet's works:

J'étais fasciné et exaspéré par la puissance du paraître, tissée par des ficelles invisibles, qui régissait ce milieu : une tribu qui a réussi à faire du bruit son mode de fonctionnement. Le bruit et les murmures cachent et délivrent, voilent et brouillent les voix. Elle fait de ce vacarme une vitrine, comme elle fait du paraître une existence, une valeur et une marchandise.'²

In this chapter I demonstrate the manner in which Genet selects a textual matrix - a morpheme, phoneme or stress pattern - and expands these 'murmures' or 'vacarme', namely the acoustic materiality of the signifier, across the text³. His acoustic 'ficelles' do not draw the dramatic text together however. They disperse themselves like filaments across the lines, but they fragment them by drawing the spectator's immediate attention to each of their individual forms. Genet employs morphological, phonological and accentual repetitions to effect this opacity of the signifier. Sounds become like 'windows', as Ben Jelloun writes. They allow the signified to be perceived through them like a window pane. But like the frame or reflecting panes of a window they simultaneously draw attention to their own non-verbal materiality⁴. This dual state is a source of theatrical experience for the spectator, who simultaneously perceives words as

¹ 'Extrait d'un article paru dans la Revue *Masques* no. 12, hiver 1981/2', in *La Bataille des Paravents*, p. 50.

² Tahar Ben Jelloun, 'Une Crépusculaire odeur l'isole', *Magazine Littéraire*, 313 (September 1993), pp. 29-30.

³ I use 'matrix' according to Michael Riffaterre's definition, namely the principal idea of the text, to which all other textual elements are in some way related (*La Production du texte*, Paris: Seuil, 1979).

⁴ In one respect textual rhythm could be considered 'verbal', for it is part of verbal language. I define it as non-verbal here, in order to distinguish it from the signified, from semantic and thematic content.

sounds, and as semantic meaning. In addition, this self-conscious affirmation of acoustic materiality underscores form as artifice. Sounds are ‘le paraître’, to borrow Ben Jelloun’s terms, the *féerie* that I defined in Part One. Our ‘existence’ is produced by form. Rhythms stylised into *Verfremdungseffekte* both conceal, ‘voilent’ the metaphorical *vide* that lies beyond form, and reveal this *vide* through the very performativity suggested by concealment.

A Definition of rhythm

In my analysis of verbal rhythm I refer to Jean Mourot’s study of Chateaubriand’s *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, an exhaustive and highly informative study of prose rhythm. Mourot’s definition of rhythm is simple: ‘la mesure fondée sur la périodicité de l’accent’¹. When syllables are isometrically arranged, syntactical stress is in turn regulated. In itself stress, in much the same way as phonemes or actual words, is asemantic. It is the degree zero of rhythm. But the more regularly and symmetrically stresses are divided, the more heightened the sense of rhythm becomes. In rhythmic prose stresses occur at proportionate and discernible intervals separated by breaks of varying sizes which are marked, or not marked by punctuation. Rhythm *stricto sensu* is derived from the regularity of stress. However, Roman Jakobson indicates in *Questions de poétique* that linguistic repetition of any description is a source of rhythm: ‘nous devons constamment tenir compte de ce fait irrécusable qu’à tous les niveaux de la langue l’essence, en poésie, de la technique artistique réside en des retours réitérés.’² In this study I therefore examine *all* repetitions of the signifier, whether accentual, phonological or lexical. I examine morphological repetitions, homophony, syllable isometry and the systematisation of prosody.

It is essential not to overlook the fact that Genet’s rhythm is physically articulated by an actor and received by an audience. He wrote for the stage as well as for the silent reader. I therefore combine an adherence to Mourot’s instrumental methodology with consideration of the spectator. I illustrate how Genet’s concepts of the *réel*, the *féerie*

¹ Mourot’s italics, Jean Mourot, *Le Génie d’un style : Chateaubriand, rythme et sonorité dans les Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (Paris: Colin, 1969), p. 49.

² Roman Jakobson, *Questions de poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 222.

and the *vide* are generated out of rhythmic structures, amongst other verbal and non-verbal signs.

I. Rhythmic Structures in Genet's Plays: A Stylistic Study

Genet's later plays, *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents* are commonly regarded as his most 'poetic'. On close examination of just how Genet structures the signifier, it becomes apparent that his attention to detail in the stylisation of the verbal signifier prevails throughout his dramatic oeuvre. My aim in this chapter is not to provide an inventory of his rhythmic figures. Instead, I highlight the multitude of different syntactical structures he employs and demonstrate how they create the dynamics of expansion and dispersion, resistance to metaphor and metaphorical resistance. I concurrently explain these coinages. I show how these movements create incantation, for which I propose a definition, and I illustrate how incantation in turn illustrates Genet's understanding of theatre.

Incantation through stylisation of the verbal signifier is present to a greater or lesser extent throughout Genet's theatre from play to play and from character to character. Examples of rhythmic structures could be chosen from any of Genet's plays and from any of Genet's characters within those plays. Whether uttered by maid or mistress, prisoner or guard, pimp or prostitute, black or white, Arab or colonial... rhythmic structures dominate dialogue in Genet's plays. I propose to lift examples from their contexts and juxtapose them, as a way of establishing the paradigmatic specificity of rhythm across Genet's theatre. Since I argue that rhythmic structures do not directly mirror content, I think I am justified in omitting lengthy thematic contextualisation for each example. One of Genet's posthumous directors, Patrice Chéreau, describes Genet's theatre as a series of individual, unique poems¹. I feel that the poetry of each rhythmic system I discuss will not be attenuated for having been removed from its surrounding structures.

My analysis of rhythms in Genet's theatre comprises a study of the minutiae of his verbal constructions. The intricacy of my study is justified by the complexity of Genet's own workings. A comparison of the various versions of his plays reveals his

¹ See Matthieu Galey, 'Genet. Le Dernier lyrique', *Théâtre en Europe* (January 1984), pp. 61-65.

meticulous corrections. A comma is added or removed, words are inverted or replaced, to enhance rhymes or rhythms¹.

I want to analyse in close detail an extract from the Ninth Tableau of *Les Paravents* (appendix A)². Better than any other piece of Genet's theatre, this extract exemplifies the stylisation of the signifier as incantation. Notwithstanding, I maintain that textual stylisation prevails throughout Genet's oeuvre.

(i) Morphological Repetition

In *Le Plaisir du texte* Roland Barthes suggests that 'répéter à l'excès, c'est entrer dans la perte, dans le zéro du signifié.'³ Morphological repetition - the repetition of lexical or grammatical morphemes - effects an eclipsing of sense by sound⁴. The signifier attains significance at the expense of the morpheme's semantic content.

(a) Lexical Repetition: Expansion, Dispersion and Mobility

Genet selects a lexical morpheme and expands it into the surrounding text, so that the unit of artifice solicits the spectator's attention. The extract from *Les Paravents* that I analyse reaches the zero degree of semantic signification through the incantatory crescendo of asemantic materiality that swells as the text progresses.

In my extract from the Ninth Tableau of *Les Paravents* Leïla returns to La Mère after a stealing spree. The motive behind her petty thefts is not to ensure the subsistence of her destitute family. It is rather, to affirm her devotion to depravity. In his 'Commentaires du neuvième tableau' Genet stresses that Leïla and La Mère are to appear as 'des créatures qui ne cessent de pécher. Donc une humilité très grande en face du Gendarme.'⁵ The tableau is written with the intention of 'montrer l'avilissement de cette

¹ One illustration out of hundreds is provided by *Les Bonnes*. The very first words of *Les Bonnes* are 'et ces gants' in the 1976 version but just 'ces gants' in the 1958 one. These minute changes are clearly effected for the sake of form and style.

² The extract of the Ninth Tableau that I analyse begins with the Gendarme's entry, and ends with his bellowing 'Silence!' (pp. 98-100.) See Appendix A.

³ Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 67.

⁴ A morpheme can be either lexical or grammatical. The grammatical morpheme 'peut évidemment désigner la composante de la lexie qui s'attache à sa base pour indiquer les marques grammaticales ou catégorielles.' Lexical morphemes however are not merely cogs in the grammatical machine. They carry semantic meaning and are generally the words that the memory focusses on and retains (Jean Mazaleyrat and Georges Molinié, *Vocabulaire de la stylistique*, (Paris: P.U.F, 1989), p. 229).

⁵ *Commentaires du neuvième tableau*, p. 104.

famille.’¹ This abasement contrasts starkly with the Gendarme, who is ‘*plus grand que les Arabes (environ deux mètres de hauteur)*’ (p. 95)². I illustrate how through lexical repetition Genet saps the lexical morpheme of its seme so that words no longer carry signification³. They are designated to inappropriate referents so that in the end only their sound bears relevance.

The most notable instance of lexical repetition is the proliferation of the adjective ‘petit’. To begin with Saïd ‘était encore tout **petit**’, says La Mère⁴. She then describes the clock parts as ‘des **petites** roues, des **petites** étoiles, des **petites** vis, des **petits** vers, des **petits** clous, des **petits** machins.’ Evidence of the degree zero of the signified, effected by exaggerated repetition, becomes apparent when the Gendarme, who visibly towers over the two women says ‘comme nous les **petits**’. La Mère quickly retorts ‘des **petits**? Vous autres, pour nous, vous n’êtes pas des **petits**.’ In the *Oeuvres Complètes* version Genet elides the ‘e atone’ of ‘petit’ in the feminine. The omission of gender declension allows each occurrence of the adjective to be identical, further enhancing repetition: ‘des **petits** roues, des **petits** étoiles, des **petits** vis’⁵. The word ‘petit’ becomes a material surface of sound. The signifier is dislocated so flagrantly from the signified - illustrated clearly when the towering Gendarme describes himself as ‘petit’ - that it slides effortlessly from big to small, animate to inanimate, noble to vile. Through lexical repetition the word moves towards pure form.

In both ‘Ce qui est resté d’un Rembrandt’ and ‘Le Secret de Rembrandt’ Genet describes Rembrandt’s obsession with visual detail. Rembrandt would far sooner paint a wrinkled face than a smooth face, an intricate lace sleeve than a plain cotton sleeve.

¹ *Commentaires du neuvième tableau*, p. 104.

² Genet’s italics.

³ The *seme* is defined by A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés as ‘l’unité minimal de la signification, situé au plan du contenu’ (*Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, (Paris:Hachette, 1979), p. 333). Jean Mazaleyrat and Georges Molinié add the fact that the seme concerns denotation by the signified, determined by context. They go on to say that semes are ordered ‘essentiellement en couples d’oppositions binaires, sous forme de traits : animé - non animé, humain - non humain, matériel - non matériel, haut-bas... La combinaison de ces traits dénotatifs permet de construire, pour chaque lexie, une analyse sémique’ (*Vocabulaire de la stylistique* (Paris: P.U.F, 1989), pp. 319-320). This definition is useful, for it indicates that the generally accepted denotation of a word falls into certain categories, for example animate or inanimate. Genet subverts these categories by employing words in incongruous situations. The Gendarme is described as ‘petit’ despite the fact that he is wearing platform shoes and shoulder pads. This underscores how Genet chooses words predominantly for the way they sound, as opposed to what they mean. The words therefore find themselves in arbitrary semantic categories.

⁴ In this chapter I highlight in **bold** the salient elements in each example.

⁵ Jean Genet, *Les paravents, Oeuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), V, p.233.

‘Même jeune, il aura préféré des visages travaillés par l’âge’, writes Genet (p. 32). The viewer of a Rembrandt portrait traces the subject across the surface of its skin, its hair, its clothes. But Genet goes on: ‘les rides [...] les pattes d’oie [...] ne sont pas nourris par la chaleur qui vient d’un organisme vivant; ils sont ornements’ (p. 32). The detail that constitutes one of Rembrandt’s faces does not attempt to convey the psychology or history of the subject; it is superficial decoration. Just like Genet’s masks and roles, behind the ornaments and accoutrements lies nothing. Remove the details, and the subject disappears: ‘on ne débarbouillera pas de sa décrépitude M^{me} Trip, elle n’est que cela.’¹ The wrinkles on Mrs Trip’s face are each accorded the weight and importance of her identity, because they *are* her identity. In the same way behind Leïla, La Mère and the Gendarme’s nonsensical repetitions of ‘petit’ lies nothing - no meaning, no content. In the absence of any essence of meaning, meaning is produced through the artificial elaboration of a fund of signs. This is illustrated metaphorically by Genet’s prioritisation of acoustic form over content.

Genet’s rhythmic structures are positioned within a dynamic schema. His verbal rhythms are elaborated according to a tension between distillation and dispersion. Verbal elements are distilled into artificially quintessential rhythmic structures on the one hand, and on the other different, conflicting structures are dispersed across the text. The variability of Genet’s syntagmatic figures resists the power of any one rhythmical paradigmatic constant. The effect is a fragmentation reminiscent of polyphonic shifting, as I explain and illustrate.

Expansion of a textual matrix such as the one that emerges around the morpheme ‘petit’ constitutes an autonomous structure. Each micro-system in Genet’s texts is in turn eclipsed by surrounding systems of equal intricacy. An example from *Les Bonnes* serves to elucidate this dynamic. Claire’s utterance contains two micro-systems, each expanded from a separate matrix, one ‘Madame’ and the other ‘elle’:

Madame nous a vêtues comme des princesses. **Madame** a soigné Claire ou Solange, car **Madame** nous confondait toujours. **Madame** nous enveloppait de sa bonté. **Madame** nous permettait d’habiter ensemble ma soeur et moi. **Elle** nous donnait les petits objets dont **elle** ne se sert plus. **Elle** supporte que le dimanche nous allions à la messe et que nous nous placions sur un prie-Dieu près du sien. [...] **Elle** accepte l’eau bénite que nous lui tendons et parfois, du bout de son gant, **elle** nous en offre!’ (pp. 87-88).

¹ ‘Le Secret de Rembrandt’, p. 32.

The matrix 'Madame' around which the first micro-system grows is enhanced by the alliteration of /m/ ('permettait', 'ensemble', 'ma', 'moi'). Alliteration becomes more insistent as the system develops. But this system is replaced suddenly by another, elaborated from the morpheme 'elle' which trails a string of alliterations ('les', 'plus', 'le', 'allions', 'la', 'placions', 'l'eau', 'lui'). My last chapter illustrated how polyphonic shifting from role to role creates an impression of discontinuity, portraying the individual as fragmented. At a parallel level the potentially globalising effects of one coherent rhythm are resisted, as a multitude of singular rhythmic structures is dispersed throughout the text. The fragmentation of the subject illustrated in my last chapter with respect to polyphonic shifting is now supported by, or produced through Genet's use of rhythm.

Stéphane Mallarmé, who Genet states has the greatest influence on his sense of poetry, describes verse in terms of spatial poetics. The verse is the expansion of a central matrix, such as 'Madame' and 'elle' above. It becomes 'un mot parfait, vaste, natif, une adoration pour la vertu des mots.'¹ In his 'Crise de vers' with the term 'verse' Mallarmé refuses to refer exclusively to classical versification, of which he announces the fall. He stresses that poetic resonances can occur anywhere within the sentence². His definition of the verse is reminiscent of the unity and disparity characteristic of Genet's texts. Meaning is represented as at once singular - 'un mot' - and plural - 'vaste' - , fixed and mobile. Were Genet to subordinate his prose to one globalising rhythmic system, he would betray any commitment to a plurality of expression. He alternates from one isometry to another, from one rhythmic structure to another, in the same way that his characters shift from role to role. Here, the alternation between the two micro-systems that are each expanded from a unique and singular textual matrix produces the effects of both fracturing and mobility, as one hermetic, fixed structure makes way for another. On the one hand textual matrices are expanded across the dialogue to create a quintessential Mallarmean 'mot parfait'. On the other, these signifiers 'de tous rythmes' in Mallarmé's words, each draw attention to their own materiality, thus dispersing the spectator's attention across the text³.

¹ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Quelques médaillons et portraits en pied, Oeuvres complètes* La Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 492.

² Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers', *Variations sur un sujet, Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 360-368.

³ 'Crise de vers', pp. 360-368

Rembrandt's Mrs Trip is made up of a multitude of details. Each detail is as semiotically opaque as the next¹. Genet's verbal rhythms create the same effect. Instead of one central overriding global rhythmic system, there are many, each a shining ornament vying for the spectator's attention like the diamonds of Queen Irma's tiara². 'Inventez, sinon des mots, des phrases qui coupent au lieu de lier', says Archibald to the actors in the black ceremony enacted in *Les Nègres* (pp. 37-38). With respect to rhythmic structures, Jean Mourot writes that Chateaubriand wishes to 'les ramener sous l'angle d'une perspective unique, à l'unité d'une synthèse' (p. 112). Genet displays no such desire to create a *flumen orationis*, to unify or harmonise through rhythm. His structures are each so self-contained and distinct from each other, that they resemble a disparate sequence of unique verses. They abandon diegesis. They scatter like fireworks instead of being shaded into one. Rhythm in Genet's theatre does not globalise or unify, it fragments and dislocates into a shower of shooting stars. Each rhythm - in this case lexical repetitions - appears, shines resplendent, and is eclipsed by another, as is illustrated by the two rhythmic structures centred around separate focal points in the extract from *Les Bonnes*.

(b) Cross-Character Lexical Repetition

The expansion of a textual matrix does not stop at the threshold of one character's dialogue. Rhythmic structures are non-essentialist. Micro-systems echo from character to character, scene to scene and tableau to tableau, accentuating the central part played by acoustic materiality in Genet's theatre.

Genet introduces his multi-tiered set that comprises platforms and screens, in the eleventh tableau of *Les Paravents*. At stage level screens depict the prison in which Saïd

¹ In the 1999 exhibition of Rembrandt's self-portraits at the National Gallery London, the developments in Rembrandt's painting techniques are patent. Whilst brushstrokes in his earlier paintings are subsumed into the composition, concealing the mechanics of painting technique (*Self Portrait as a Young Man*, 1630), in portraits executed from his forties onwards paint is applied in thick slabs that draw attention self-consciously to the manner in which the portrait is composed (*Self Portrait at the age of 63*, 1669). On the one hand this technique serves better to represent the gnarled features of an ageing Rembrandt. On the other, 200 years ahead of its time this is an avant-garde statement on form in its own right, that is not solely answerable to the theme it represents. From the privileged vantage point I held of viewing many of Rembrandt's self-portraits side by side, the interplay between technique development and the ageing of the portrait subject is clear.

² In the first version of *Le Balcon* Irma's tiara is made of pearls. In Genet's oeuvre diamonds can sometimes symbolise the weight, immobility and immutability of the quintessential image. For this reason he writes Irma's 'diam's' into the revised version.

an Leïla are held captive. The next level represents M. and M^{me} Blankensee's balcony. The top level is home to the Lieutenant, Sergeant and legionnaires. Genet traverses the apparent divisions between the three social strata with repeated stichomythia¹. To confirm that the Sergeant has received instructions the Lieutenant employs a recognised military formula twice:

LE LIEUTENANT	[...] Vu?
LE SERGENT	[...] Vu.
[...]	
LE LIEUTENANT	[...] Entendu?
LE SERGENT	[...] Entendu (pp. 124-125 & 126).

These words are repeated later two levels lower, by Leïla and Saïd who incidentally possess the same initials as the Lieutenant and the Sergeant, creating a visual echo for the reader²:

LEÏLA	<i>ironique</i> : Vu?
SAÏD	Vu.
LEÏLA	<i>même ton</i> : Entendu?
SAÏD	Entendu (p. 126).

Genet dislocates any connotative military semes from their morphemes by placing them in the mouths of criminals. He then proceeds to remove all semes, whether connotative or denotative, from the morpheme altogether, when the Prison Guard recites both parts of the stichomythia alone. This eliminates any functional purpose from the expression, for the prison guard no longer uses it for verifying a situation with someone else:

GARDIEN	([...] <i>imitant les répliques plus haut, pour lui-même.</i>) Vu?... Vu. Entendu? Entendu (p. 135)
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In two successive moves Genet strips the morphemes 'vu' and 'entendu' firstly of their military connotation and then of their semantic denotation. The signifier becomes opaque, for the signified is abstracted. Materiality is prioritised. Communication is exposed as the ritualistic recital of lines. On the one hand Genet reveals the pessimistic impossibility of real exchange. On the other, he shows certain margins of creative possibility that result in a celebration of humour. Genet's rhythm is an extremely

¹ Stichomythia is a Greek term literally meaning 'line talk' (Oxford English Dictionary). It is a dramatic structure comprising alternate single lines.

² A visual connection between 'Leïla' and 'Saïd', both of which feature the 'ï', could also be said to exist.

jubilatory, playful, mobile and humorous celebration of form, as can be seen from this tongue-in-cheek use of military jargon. I develop the dynamics of Genet's humour further presently.

In this example Genet reveals vapid ceremony by removing the seme from the morpheme through lexical repetition. Through the same process of repetition he even removes the material morpheme itself, leaving just its image, or its memory imprinted in the spectator's mind. In my critique of *Les Paravents* in Chapter Two I stressed that the Arab resistance to power is no more authentic, nor less governed by the theatricality of the image than is the colonial power it seeks to overthrow. The colonials transform the Sergeant into an icon and equally the Arabs transform Saïd into one. Through the signifier Genet portrays the parallels between the two camps, even though through the signified Ommou seeks to distinguish the authenticity of the Arab battle from the theatricality of colonialism¹. The Lieutenant's galvanising words to his Sergeant are:

[...] Que chaque homme pour n'importe quel autre soit un miroir. Deux **jambes** doivent se regarder et se voir dans les deux **jambes** d'en face, un **torse** dans le **torse** d'en face, la **bouche** dans une autre **bouche**, les **yeux** dans les **yeux**, le **nez** dans le **nez**, les **dents** dans les **dents**, les **genoux** dans les **genoux**, une boucle de **cheveux** dans... une autre ou si les **cheveux** d'en face sont raides dans un accroche-cœur... (*Très lyrique.*) [...] (p. 182).

Identity is made up of the materiality of appearance, as the Lieutenant's words indicate. When Ommou addresses the Arab soldiers she implores them not to be seduced by colonialist imagery. But whereas the semantics of her utterance call for the Arabs to forge a new authentic identity that pioneers creation instead of emulation, its rhythmic structuring mirrors exactly that of the Lieutenant:

De vous calque sur eux, être leur reflet c'est déjà être eux : **front** contre **front**, **nez** contre **nez**, **mentons-mentons**, **jabot-jabot**, et pourquoi pas, bon Dieu, pourquoi pas faire l'amour avec eux, **bouche** contre **bouche**, **haleine-haleine**, **languette-languette**, **cri** contre **cri**, **râle** contre **râle**... (p. 203).

According to the content of Ommou's utterance she contests the Lieutenant and the Arabs' obsessions with appearance. According to the rhythmic structures of her utterance, her intentions are indistinguishable from the Lieutenant's. The echo between the two monologues is patent and the spectator would not fail to miss it. However, on

¹ I employ the term 'authenticity', mindful of its etymological derivation, namely pertaining to an origin or author. No words or acts in Genet's world are original; all are inherited.

close observation it is apparent that, excepting the cases of ‘nez’ and ‘bouche’ veritable lexical repetition of the Lieutenant’s utterance does not occur. With the repetition of ‘vu’ and ‘entendu’ the morphemes are stripped of connotative and denotative signification. In the case of the echo from the Lieutenant to Ommou’s dialogues even the morphemes, the actual words themselves are removed, leaving only their image in the memory of the spectator.

With the aid of rhythmic structures Genet shows clearly the empty theatricality of human utterance, and at the same time his own performative rescripting of the meaning and status of words indicates a liberating and playful freedom to reconfigure the signs that surround us.

(c) Repetition of Grammatical Morphemes: Incantation

Unlike lexical morphemes, grammatical morphemes - usually articles, prepositions, conjunctions, etc. - pass relatively unnoticed in an utterance. If lexical morphemes, notably the elements carrying the most significant information in the sentence - usually nouns, verbs and adjectives - are the bricks of speech, then grammatical morphemes can be seen as the mortar. Through incantatory repetition, a definition of which I provide here, Genet succeeds in subverting this convention. The status of grammatical morphemes as syntagmatic articulating devices, usually little perceived in a sentence, becomes prominent. So too does the material dimension of these conventionally insignificant words.

In *Les Nègres* Archibald addresses an incendiary speech to the Blacks. Repetition of ‘que’ implicitly entails repetition of the ensuing clause. Archibald’s utterance is thus a succession of eight sentences of identical structure: conjunction ‘que’ + definite article + noun / ‘que’ + pronoun + verb:

Archibald : [...] Je vous ordonne d’être noir jusque dans vos veines et d’y charrier du sang noir. **Que** l’Afrique y circule. **Que les Nègres se nègrent.** **Qu’ils s’obstinent** jusqu’à la folie dans ce qu’on les condamne à être, dans leur ébène, dans leur odeur, dans l’oeil jaune, dans leurs goûts cannibales. **Qu’ils ne se contentent** pas de manger les Blancs, mais **qu’ils se cuisent** entre eux. **Qu’ils inventent** des recettes pour les tibias, les ortules, les jarrets, les lèvres épaisses, que sais-je, des sauces inconnues, des hoquets, des rots, des pets, qui gonfleront un jazz délétère, une peinture, une danse criminelles. **Que** si l’on change à notre égard, Nègres, **ce ne soit** par l’indulgence, mais la terreur ! (*A Diouf* :) Et vous, monsieur le Grand Vicaire, pour qui le Christ est mort ne croix, il faut vous décider. (*A Village* :) Quant à Village, **qu’il continue** son boniment (pp. 60-61).

The morpheme 'que' constitutes a matrix that is expanded throughout the text. But the effect differs from that created by the repetition of lexical morphemes illustrated above. The impression of dispersion and fragmentation is achieved, as each grammatical repetition implies the repetition of the other syntactic elements that it articulates. When an entire clause as opposed to simply one word is repeated, instead of drawing in the surrounding text, repetition fractures the text. Each time 'que' is repeated the sentence or phrase must begin again, thus forestalling continuity. In my previous chapter I referred to Bernard Combette's theory set out in *Pour une grammaire textuelle* in order to illustrate the obstruction of communicational advancement created by accumulation. The *theme* denotes familiar information; the *rheme* denotes new information. The *rheme* is higher in the hierarchy of communicational dynamism. Were these terms applicable to expression as opposed to content, the repetition of a familiar syntactical structure would denote reduced communicational progression. This is the case in the extract above from *Les Nègres*, where progress is forestalled by repetition.

In Archibald's speech discontinuity and fragmentation are enhanced by a number of other grammatical repetitions. 'Que' is of course repeated, as is the preposition 'dans' + possessive adjective + noun/relative clause ('**dans** vos veines'; '**dans** ce qu'on les condamne à être'; '**dans** leur ébène', '**dans** leur odeur'; '**dans** l'oeil jaune'; '**dans** leurs goûts cannibales'). Repetition is evident, for example in the cases of the definite article ('**les** tibias'; '**les** ortules'; '**les** jarrets'; '**les** lèvres'); the singular indefinite article 'un/une' ('**un** jazz délétère, **une** peinture, **une** danse') and the plural indefinite article ('**des** recettes'; '**des** sauces inconnues, **des** hoquets, **des** rots, **des** pets'). Each sentence becomes like a single, autonomous poetic verse, jostling with neighbouring verses for the spectator's attention.

The incessant repetition results in the spectator becoming aware of the acoustic dimension of the repeated words as well as of their content. Genet's prose is frequently described by both himself and by his critics as incantatory. 'La pièce est tout entière incantatoire', writes Gilles Sandier of *Les Paravents*¹. In his theatre it is true that Genet borrows ecclesiastical incantatory formats². I should like to argue however that it is not

¹ Gilles Sandier, 'Genet un exorciste de génie', *Arts*, 27 April 1966, in *La Bataille des Paravents*, p. 70.

² To name but a few examples, Vertu in *Les Nègres* sings the 'Litanie des blêmes' (p. 65.); the lines of Marie's mother are to be recited 'sur l'air du 'dies irae' (p. 81.) In *Les Paravents* the Voix du Condamné

solely his recourse to traditional religious or folk rhythms that typifies incantation in his theatre. All Genet's dialogues are incantatory. He succeeds for example in incorporating even grammatical morphemes into his elaboration of incantatory prose. I define what I understand by incantation.

Mallarmé's allusion to poetry as incantation assists me in arriving at a definition of incantatory prose in Genet's theatre: 'le vers qui de plusieurs vocables fait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme incantatoire [...] niant, d'un trait souverain, le hasard demeuré aux termes malgré l'artifice de leur retrempe alternée en le sens et la sonorité.'¹ Verbal elements are self-consciously concentrated and condensed into rhythmic structures that draw attention to themselves as artifice both from the point of view of their semantic, and their acoustic dimensions. Religious incantation is characterised by a repetitive, hypnotic rhythm that becomes transubstantiated. In the Eucharist bread is both food and the body of Christ. In incantation prayer is both sound and meaning, and access to higher religious consciousness. The poetic incantation of which both Mallarmé and Genet speak repeats semantic or material linguistic elements. These elements also undergo transubstantiation. Poetic incantation does not add a layer of transcendental abstraction to the concreteness of verbal language. Instead it adds a layer of artifice, materiality, presence, image. In Chapter Three I defined stylisation as the fissuring of the signifier. The tin guns at Mettray are stylised by the delinquent boys so that they are both harmless toys and dangerous arms. They become *Verfremdungseffekte*. An incantatory rhythmic structure both carries semantic content and reveals its own material dimension. Even a word such as 'que' in the extract from *Les Nègres* is repeated so that it becomes part of a discernible rhythmic structure. Like the Eucharist, it is implicitly theatrical, for it is simultaneously both sense and sound².

à mort 'psalmodiera et chantera' (p. 129); the four canticles in *Elle* are to be recited in a tone that is 'hiératique'. Repetitive, hypnotic rhythms are also suggested by Genet's stipulation in *Les Nègres* that the Blacks 'chantent à mi-voix une sorte de berceuse' (p. 62) and 'bourdonnent, bouche fermée, une mélodie' in *Les Paravents* (p. 35.). Leïla and La Mère also sing a 'mélodie'. These are overt instances of classically 'incantatory' forms. In this chapter I attempt to show how in fact all Genet's poetic forms are incantatory.

¹ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Crise de vers*, p. 368.

² Characters in Genet's plays comment on the poeticity and artifice of each other's dialogues, further enhancing the dislocation of utterances into dual layers of artificiality. Maurice and Lefranc in *Haute surveillance* stand back to appreciate Yeux-Verts's monologue (p. 49); Carmen compliments Irma on her eloquence: 'comme vous parlez bien' (*Le Balcon*, p. 67); Archibald applauds Village's turn of phrase: 'votre périphrase conviendra parfaitement' (*Les Nègres*, 1963, p. 38). Genet consequently highlights the artifice of his own rhythmic structures.

Through incantation Genet succeeds in adding a layer of acoustic artifice to words. This can be at the expense of sense, as with ‘petit’ in *Les Paravents*. It can also be at the expense of grammatical convention. Take for example Kadidja’s lines in *Les Paravents*:

[...] Ils nous accusent et nous menacent, et vous pensez à être **prudents. Et dociles. Et humbles. Et soumis. Et demoiselle. Et pain blanc. Et bonne pâte. Et voile de soie. Et pâle cigarette. Et doux baiser et douce langue. Et poussière tendre sur leurs bottes rouges !** (pp. 143-144)

Kadidja urges the Arabs not to emulate the colonials by being ‘careful’, calculated and obedient to the laws of rationalism. The complement ‘prudent’ is followed by the conjunction ‘et’ and a series of complements or nouns acting as complements, by means of an anacoluthon¹. The nominal phrases ‘pain blanc’, ‘bonne pâte’ and ‘douce langue’ are transubstantiated through incantation. They become both nouns and complements. The repetitive structure of which they are part allows for this dual status. Stylistic of the signifier allows Genet to reconfigure the structures of grammar.

Roger Blin comments in the following way on Genet’s revisions of his plays: ‘il a aussi inversé, chamboulé l’ordre logique de certaines phrases pour les rendre moins fades, pour leur donner plus de force.’² Genet structures each sentence meticulously, to create an incantation that transubstantiates even commonly unnoticed grammatical morphemes, in order to afford them more ‘force’, to make them into a central part of his theatrical creation. Theatricality is enhanced from the point of view of the spectator, who perceives Genet’s texts as both sense and sound. Words are given another layer, a material prominence. Like the Host they both represent something else and themselves.

I have indicated that grammatical repetition forestalls communicative advancement by drawing the spectator’s attention to form rather than content. In its own way enumeration in Genet’s theatre is employed to the same end.

(ii) Enumeration

With reference to plot construction in Genet’s novels Edmund White writes ‘une des manières dont Genet s’assure que ses messages resteront ambigus est d’élaborer des

¹ An anacoluthon is a ‘rupture de construction syntaxique’. (Henri Morier, *Dictionnaire de poétique et de rhétorique*, p.102.) The transformation of personal pronouns in the extract from the Ninth Tableau of *Les Paravents* - ‘le mon c’est plou’ - also constitutes an anacoluthon.

² Roger Blin, *Souvenirs et propos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p. 42.

intrigues qui sapent ses histoires.’¹ In a similar manner Genet’s enumeration empties his narratives of content. He refuses the globalising constraints of such rhetorical traditions as the ‘groupement ternaire’, favouring a plurality of formulae for his lists, which can be of any length. The effect of all his lists is however the same: they underscore the non-essentialism of the signifier-signified relationship and in turn construct artificially quintessential signs, as I illustrate. These signs succeed self-consciously in drawing attention to their own falsity and to the pre-eminence of the signifier, in this case the list, over the signified, namely what the list is supposed to describe. In the following example from *Les Nègres* Neige’s description, which in itself is already an abstraction because she is portraying the white image of the black race, is further abstracted through enumeration:

Très hargneuse: Si j’étais sûre que Village eût descendu cette femme afin de devenir avec plus d’éclat un Nègre **balafre, puant, lippu, camus, mangeur, bouffeur, bâfreur de Blancs** et de toutes les couleurs, **bavant, suant, rotant, crachant, baiseur de boucs. Toussant, pétant, lécheur de pieds blancs, feignant, malade, dégoulinant d’huile et de sueur, flasque et soumis**, si j’étais sûre qu’il l’ait tuée pour se confondre avec la nuit... Mais je sais qu’il l’aimait (p. 39)

In the absence of any essential relationship between a signifier and signified, Neige artificially constructs a quintessential definition of blackness. Her enumeration both encapsulates the referent and serves as referential *estompage*. Black identity is at once fixed by her description and yet mobile, as relativism is afforded by the centrifugal dispersion of the black image across the spectrum of epithets. In *Saint Genet* Sartre describes Genet as an empiricist and an essentialist. To my mind he is mistaken. He explains that Genet’s works ‘offrent d’abord la résistance et l’opacité irrationnelle de l’événement pour se métamorphoser d’un seul coup en classification et en descriptions d’essence’ (p. 526). For me Genet rejects the sacredness of the sign system, but elaborates his own fund of artificially quintessential signs, simultaneously endorsing and overcoming the arbitrariness of language. In Neige’s description of black people Genet underscores the artificiality of language through his exaggerated use of enumeration by

¹ Edmund White, *Jean Genet*, p. 344. See Genet, *Journal du Voleur*: ‘Ma joie serait grande de le pouvoir nommer fripon, fripouille, canaille, crapule, voyou, filon, jolis noms chargés d’évoquer ce que par dérision vous appelez un joli monde. Or ces mots chantent. Ils frédonnent’ (p. 183). Enumeration here enhances form rather than content.

indicating that no one word will suffice, and simultaneously celebrates this very fact, showing the freedom for creativity that we are afforded.

Genet recasts detail so that the more the description develops, the less certain the spectator feels about what is described. Behind the ‘architecture verbale’ lies the ‘vide’, in Genet’s words¹. Beneath the surface of discursive forms there lies nothing. Genet both visually and verbally illustrates this, again in *Les Nègres*. Enumeration creates the image of something the spectator knows not to exist. Vertu, worried that her lover Village might fall for the white girl he has been sent to rape and murder, is anxious for his return. Bobo assures her that his delay can be explained easily by the great distance he must traverse to arrive home:

- VERTU Comment, c’est très loin? C’est derrière le paravent.
- BOBO *à mi-voix, toujours, légèrement agacée* : Bien sûr. Mais en même temps ils doivent aller ailleurs.
1. **Traverser la chambre,**
 2. **passer le jardin,**
 3. **prendre un sentier de noisiers qui tourne à gauche,**
 4. **écarter les ronces,**
 5. **jeter du sel devant eux,**
 6. **chausser des bottes,**
 7. **entrer dans un bois...** C’est la nuit. Au fond du bois... [...] au fond du bois,
 8. **chercher la porte du souterrain,**
 9. **trouver la clé, descendre les marches...**
 10. **creuser la fosse...**
 11. **S’enfuir.** La lune aura-t-elle attendu? Tout cela prend du temps. [...] (p. 85).

Vertu’s self-conscious deconstruction of diegetic space in favour of real scenic space does not deter Bobo from fabricating the illusion of distance. Enumeration becomes theatrical incantation. Bobo’s utterance is fissured so that the spectator both believes her description of the distance Village must cross, and suspends that belief, knowing that Village is actually only feet away behind the screen.

On the one hand Genet’s texts contain immutable, essential-seeming micro-systems like grammatical and lexical repetitions, or enumerations, that are concentrated around a particular syntactical structure. On the other, Genet reminds us constantly that beneath his forms lies no essential truth, as he underscores the falsity of his rhythmic structures. The fixity and sterility of representation is at once illustrated, and resisted.

¹*L’Etrange mot d’*, p. 172.

(iii) *Homophony*

I have mentioned briefly that the lexical repetitions of 'Madame' and 'elle' in *Les Bonnes* are intensified by phonemic repetition. Homophony - the repetition of chosen phonemes for effects of style - is prominent in Genet's theatre. Jean Mazeleyrat points out in *Eléments de métrique française* that the stability and unity afforded by the symmetry of 'coup de gong' masculine or feminine rhymes positioned at the end of the classical verse is forsaken when internal homophonies such as alliterations and assonances are introduced¹. He states that verses are fragmented into a cacophony that obstructs the flow of harmony. Genet's use of internal rhyme serves to create a tension between harmony and cacophony, as textual matrices are materially expanded with the aid of homophones - alliteration, assonance and rhyme - to form essential-seeming homophonic blocks, as fixed and ineffable as Rembrandt's ornaments. And yet these ornaments are centrifugally fragmented and dispersed across the text.

Phonemes are inert and require discursive configuration to acquire signification. Notions of an inherently expressive, musical or symbolic dimension to the phoneme have nevertheless prevailed since Plato's *Dialogues* between Cratylus, Hermogenes, and Socrates. I discuss briefly the concept of Cratylism and then illustrate how Genet not only rejects the essentialism of the phoneme as he does the essentialism of the morpheme, but how he also actively exaggerates the dislocation between the phoneme and the referent through his refusal of a metaphorical link between sense and sound.

(a) *Cratylism and Artifice*

According to Cratylus the relationship between the phoneme and the world around us is immediate. The 'real world', the mental image of that world and the material representation of the image are one and the same. Synesthetic correspondences between sounds and colours are upheld by theoreticians nearer this century. Correspondences between phonemic timbre and objects are claimed by André Martinet for example. He purports to provide scientific support for the idea that /i/ evokes smallness because of the limited distance the mouth opens to pronounce it². Daniel Briolet claims that research on

¹ Jean Mazeleyrat, *Eléments de métrique française* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1974), pp. 184-202.

² André Martinet, 'Peut-on dire d'une langue qu'elle est belle?', *Revue d'esthétique* (Jul-Dec. 1965), p. 231. Timbre refers to whether the vowel is closed, notably when the articulatory organs have moved the most from their position of rest (i, y, u, e, Ø, o), or open, when they have moved the least (a, α, ε, œ).

the phonemic expressivity of certain sounds reveals /i/ to be perceived by the majority as being 'claire, fine, légère', whilst /u/ is 'sombre et grave'. This justifies Mallarmé's sense of the conflict between the words 'jour' and 'nuit' at the level of signifier as well as signified, without capturing any of Mallarmé's disappointment in that¹. On the contrary, Briolet concludes that 'les sons possèdent, lorsqu'ils sont répétés, une propriété universelle, en dépit de l'infinie diversité des effets produits non seulement d'un texte à l'autre, mais encore d'une langue à une autre.'² The symbolism of sounds is perceived as phenomenologically objective.

Returning to Plato's *Dialogues*, phonic mimesis is contested by Hermogenes, who upholds the conventionalist thesis that language is analogy. Social convention and artifice constitute Hermogenes' basis for all linguistic representation. 'La nature n'assigne aucun nom en propre à aucun objet', he says³. For Hermogenes hieroglyphic or phonetic correspondences bear no rationalist, essentialist link to what they describe.

The dislocation of the phoneme from the signified and from the referent has been compensated for by many poets through what can be termed 'artificial naturalism'. Combinations of nasal, labial, palatal, voiced or voiceless phonemes are repeated, associated, combined, interrupted or modulated to create an artificial Cratylist utopia through effects of softness, hardness, sharpness, euphony or cacophony. In *Biffures* for example Michel Leiris attributes phonemes to specific gustative, olfactive and tactile senses. Through phonic metaphor vowels with higher pitch connote acidic smells, nasals denote the smell of meat, *et al*⁴. Whilst not upholding the Cratylist thesis of essentialist correspondence, Leiris along with Francis Ponge and his *Le Parti pris des choses* for example, endeavour to create 'artificially natural' correspondences, something that Genet has no intention of attempting⁵.

Genet refuses this kind of 'phonomimology', to borrow Gérard Genette's coinage from *Mimologiques, Voyage en Cratylie*. He rejects not only Cratylism but also artificial naturalism. Obsessive hermeneutic taxonomy involves attributing signification to each and every sound, thus binding materiality to metaphorical meaning. Instead of attempting

¹ Mallarmé writes in *Crise de vers* 'quelle déception, devant la perversité conférant à *jour* comme à *nuit*, contradictoirement, des timbres obscur ici, là clair.' (pp. 363-4.)

² Daniel Briolet, *Le Langage poétique* (Paris: Nathan Université, 1984), p. 103.

³ Plato, *Dialogues*, trad. by Méridier (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1961), 384 d.

⁴ Michel Leiris, *Biffures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

⁵ Francis Ponge, *Le Parti pris des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

to ally phonemes with what they represent, Genet further dislocates sound from sense. The arbitrariness that already characterises language is underscored by his use of homophony in theatre. Through resistance to metaphor sounds are freed, to expose their own acoustic, material form. Genet resists what could be termed a ‘Pongian’ approach to metaphor, whereby the harshness of the syllable ‘tre’ and the fluidity of ‘huî’ reflect the scaly outside and viscid inside of ‘l’huître’ respectively¹. But Genet allows for metaphorical reconfiguration at another level. I explain this with reference to his use of assonance, alliteration, and rhyme.

(b) Assonance and Alliteration

I refer to the extract from the Ninth Tableau of *Les Paravents*, where homophony features in a highly exaggerated form. The most prominent assonances of the passage concern /y/ and /u/, expanded from the ‘tutoiement’ and the ‘vouvoiement’, the use of which is debated by Leïla, La Mère and the Gendarme. The most prominent alliterations are /p/ and /l/, expanded from the word ‘pendule’. This refers to the clock that Leïla paints on the screen. Interestingly, in the 1961 version of *Les Paravents* ‘réveille-matin’ features instead of ‘pendule’. Genet clearly writes ‘pendule’ into his revised edition for it shares the phoneme /y/, with ‘tu’. The clock, the ‘tu’ and the ‘vous’ are textual matrices which are expanded and fragmented into their phonemes, which are dispersed throughout the text. The individual sounds eventually become more noticeable to the spectator than the semantic content of the words that contain them.

The alliteration of the /p/ of ‘pendule’ prevails throughout the beginning of the scene. In the first few sentences alone we can note ‘perles’(twice); ‘porte’; ‘pendule’(three times); ‘petit’(eight times); ‘complètement’; ‘pièce’(twice); ‘pour’(six times); ‘posées’; ‘pensez’(twice); ‘épiciier’; ‘aperçois’; ‘par’; ‘espèce’ and ‘plein’². The /l/ from ‘pendule’, expanded from the name Leïla, recurs throughout *Les Paravents*. A clear illustration of this expansion is provided towards the end of the play by Si Slimane when the crowds await the hallowed couple, Leïla and Saïd: ‘Leïla? Elle coule vraiment doucement, elle meurt comme elle a vécu : à la paresseuse’ (p. 227). In the ninth tableau the /l/ of ‘pendule’ and of ‘Leïla’, prevails. The constant repetition of ‘plus’, which

¹ *Le Parti pris des choses*.

² P. 98, from ‘la pendule a toujours été là [...]’ to ‘cigarettes, trotinettes...’.

contains the /p/, the /y/ and the /l/ of 'pendule', is repeated six times. Other repetitions of /l/ include 'perles'(twice); 'clous'; 'molettes'; 'étoiles'; 'complètement' (twice); 'là'(three times); 'oblige'; 'éloigne'; 'réellement'; 'molle'; 'poli'. The definite articles 'le', 'la' and 'les' are of course prolific in any text. In this extract Genet exploits their phonic potential to the maximum. The word order of the following phrase: 'tous les ressorts il les avait posées sur une assiette' could have been inverted to avoid repetition of the subject pronoun 'il' and object pronoun 'les' (p. 98). We are reminded of Blin's comment in my section on enumeration: Genet uses inversion to add force to utterances. Towards the end of the debate Genet also transubstantiates the pronouns 'tu' and 'vous' into nouns so that they require the article 'le', further augmenting the recurrence of /l/.

Assonances of the /y/ from /pādyl/ and /ty/ and of the /u/ from /vu/ dominate the extract. The phoneme /y/ occurs in the following instances: 'une'; 'pendule'(three times); 'figurez'; 'juste'(twice); 'tu'(ten times); 'cul'(twice); 'ordure'; 'plus'(eight times); 'surtout'; 'du'(twice); 'sur'; 'habituer' and 'vu'(twice). The phoneme /u/ occurs in the following words: 'vous'(seventeen times); 'jour'(twice); 'tout'(six times); 'pour'(six times); 'tous'; 'voudrait'; 'roues'; 'clous'; 'foutre'; 'coup'(three times); 'nous'(ten times); 'voudrais'; 'pouvez'; 'surtout'; 'doute'; 'goutte'; 'mou'(three times); 'plou'(twice) and 'fou'. The isometry of 'tu', 'cul' 'plus', 'du' and 'vu' and then 'vous', 'tout', 'tous', 'clous', 'coup', 'nous', 'mou', 'plou' and 'fou' raises these homophones from the status of assonance to 'rime pauvre', enhancing the effects of repetition¹.

Genet's express use of homophony is unquestionable. The effects of incantation he creates depend upon it. Textual progression is effected by expansion of form, not of semantic or thematic factors. The fact that the clock, a sketch Leïla draws on a paper screen at the beginning of the tableau, is itself just a drawing and not a real clock, contributes crucially to the impression that layer upon layer of artifice is accumulated on Genet's stage². Character, the individual and the subject are seen to exist only in terms of their form, their material representation.

¹ Rhymes can be 'pauvres', 'suffisants', or 'riches'. In a 'rime pauvre' only the final syllable is a homophone. In a 'rime suffisant' the final two syllables, usually a stressed vowel and ensuing consonant, are homophones. In the 'rime riche' the final three syllables are homophones (Jean Mazeleyrat, *Eléments de métrique*, pp. 209-214).

² Incidentally, the clock in *Les Paravents* is made of Galalith - fake marble - instead of the real thing, adding yet another layer of artificiality.

Paronomasia according to Pierre Fontanier takes place when the author ‘réunit dans la même phrase des mots dont le son est à peu près le même, mais le sens est tout à fait différent.’¹ The over-abundance of words including the phonemes /y/, /u/, /l/ and /p/, in addition to the fact that these words would not belong in the text were the laws of semantic logic adhered to, testifies to Genet’s use of paronomasia. As the scene progresses form eclipses content until semantic signification is eroded completely. ‘Plou’ for example is a neologism devoid of semantic sense. However, it gains coherence within the homophonic structure constructed around /u/ within which it is flanked by ‘mou’ and ‘tout’. Other examples of acoustic as opposed to semantic determination include ‘harengs saurs’, which forsakes sense in favour of the homophonic repetition of the /s/ and the /O/ of the preceding word ‘ressorts’. There is little need to explain why a kipper is out of place inside a clock. Equally, whereas ‘clé à molettes’, an adjustable spanner could conceivably appear in the same semantic field as clock, or clock repairs at least, the semantic justification of ‘cigarettes’ is questionable, as is that of ‘trotinette’, a child’s go-kart. These words are chosen in order to constitute a network of homophonic resonances around the phonemes /ε/ and /t/. Counter-assonances are meticulously threaded through the dialogues at the expense of sense². The spectator realises that the only meaning Genet provides is through the falsity of overtly artificial forms.

Genet’s use of conventionally inappropriate imagery is not a surrealist subversion of stereotypical signification. Genet empties signs of the vapid meaning attributed to them by society, but does not empower them with renewed meaning. Instead, he leaves an imbalance between sense and sound that engenders empowerment of a different kind, both for himself and for his characters and spectators. This empowerment is the potential to exploit language to unmistakably humorous ends.

¹ Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours*, p. 347.

² Counter-assonance is created when consonants recur in spite of heterophonic vowels, for example in the case of ‘plus’ and ‘pendule’, ‘complètement’ and ‘perles’ (see Jean Mazeleyrat, *Éléments de métrique*, pp. 209-214).

(c) Humour through Morphological and Phonological Imbalance

Michael Issacharoff explains the mechanics of humour in theatre¹. Comedy is effected by the ‘*manifeste déséquilibre, une démesure*’ between the referent, signifier and signified². Issacharoff highlights three possible imbalances, each of which can constitute a source of humour: morphological, lexical and phonological. Examples of morphological imbalance include deforming pre-existing morphemes into neologisms such as ‘plou’ in the analysis above. ‘Plou’ is no doubt a distortion of ‘plus’, as it is syntagmatically preceded by ‘non’. This non-sensical morpheme draws attention to sound rather than to sense. Genet’s grammatical modifications, for example the anacoluthons ‘bonne pâte’, ‘pain blanc’ and ‘douce langue’ are also examples of what Issacharoff refers to ‘morphological imbalance’.

Humour in Genet’s theatre is also phonologically derived. The ‘harengs saurs’ in the extract from *Les Paravents* are included as components of a clock because of their ‘rime suffisant’ with ‘ressorts’, namely ‘springs’. The ‘cigarettes’ and ‘trotinettes’ are included for their ‘rime suffisant’ with ‘clés à molettes’, spanners. Phonic consistency is maintained at the expense of semantic coherence. The imbalance between the exaggerated use of phonological repetition in contrast with the negligible significance of semantism, leads to comedy.

On the one hand Genet’s nonsensical verbal creations could hint at a despair with language reminiscent of Ionesco’s crazed and dazed characters who have no choice but to repeat cliché after cliché. On the other, Genet’s playful disregard for linguistic convention and his appeal to humour can be upheld as liberating and jubilatory.

Genet portrays speech as an empty sham of meaningless utterances by foregrounding the acoustic dimension of words at the expense of their semantic content. He also produces this effect of emptiness by resisting direct metaphorical signification. His homophones are neither Cratylist, nor artificially naturalist, as I elucidate.

¹ See Michael Issacharoff, *Le spectacle du discours*, who explains Ionesco’s humorous effects in *Jacques ou la soumission* (p. 152). I adapt his method of analysis, in order to examine the mechanics of humour in Genet’s theatre.

² Issacharoff’s italics, Michael Issacharoff, *Le spectacle du discours* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1985), pp.121-122.

(d) Homophony and the Resistance to Metaphor

When a linguistic element, for example the phonemes /p/, /l/, /y/ and /u/ in the extract from *Les Paravents*, is discernibly repeated, the writer desires to create an effect. But this effect need not be directly metaphorical. The phonemes in the extract for example cannot be said to reflect the sound of a clock. In his analysis of *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* Mourot establishes 'une parenté dans les thèmes, qui procèdent d'une même orientation de l'imagination, une similitude dans l'allure, dans la place de certains mots' (p. 17). He corroborates a verifiable link between rhythmic figures and thematic content. For instance, Chateaubriand divides sentences into hemistiches of equal length when describing the regulated, methodical movement of a cradle or a waltz. Chateaubriand is not alone in his association of form to content in rhythmic patterning. Henri Meschonnic describes rhythmic figures as 'métaphoriques' and Valéry insists that 'l'art implique et exige une équivalence et un échange perpétuellement exercés entre la forme et le fond, entre le son et le sens, entre l'acte et la matière.'¹ To my mind Genet refuses this direct correlation between sound and sense in his poetic prose. In *Glas* Derrida points out Genet's obsession with the phonemic combination /gl/, found in 'églantine', 'glaïeul', 'sanglot', 'galalithe' and of course 'glas'². Specific phonemes recur throughout a play or throughout Genet's complete oeuvre, but not in order to recreate acoustically any particular entity. A use of fricative timbres in the extract from *Les Paravents* would constitute a more convincing acoustic recreation of the 'très joli carillon' of a clock, than the phonemes /p/, /l/, /y/ and /u/, the timbres of which bear no resemblance to the sound of a clock (p. 103). Genet's use of homophony resists directly interpretable metaphor at one level, but exposes it at another, as I explain.

Genet's rhythms do not mirror thematics or character. In my last chapter I described how interruptions caused by acoustic special effects, by intonational modifications and by thematic changes, constitute a metaphor for the truncation of one role played by the another. I therefore highlighted a tropic link between form and content. At the same time I stated that roles in Genet's theatre are not character specific. A dislocation is effected between the role and the person playing. In the same way poetic

¹ Henri Meschonnic, *Pour la poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), I, p. 83, and Paul Valéry, 'Variétés, 'Etudes littéraires', in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 658.

² *Glas II: Que reste-t-il du savoir absolu?* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1981).

structures of the signifier do not denote individual characters and do not pertain to specific roles. This resistance to direct metaphorical representation has various effects. By refusing the direct tropism heralded by Chateaubriand or Valéry Genet allows the signifier to exist on its own terms. The spectator perceives what Roman Jakobson terms 'le côté palpable des signes'¹. A return to Genet's description of Rembrandt's paintings serves to elucidate this shifting of priority:

A la fois, il veut, puisque c'est le but de la peinture, représenter le monde, et à la fois le rendre méconnaissable [...] Cette double exigence l'amène à donner à la peinture comme matière une importance égale à ce qu'elle doit figurer'².

The paint simultaneously conforms to and resists the strictures of representation in order to reveal its own materiality. The paint becomes double: it is shape and colour, and also the detail on a face. The materiality of Genet's verbal language at once carries semantic content and refuses semantic signification. It both represents semantics and represents itself. The phonemes /p/, /l/, /y/ and /u/ in the extract are not stylised in order to represent the chimes of a clock. They are thus freed to represent themselves, their own materiality as sound.

Genet's acoustic forms do not contain artificially natural metaphorical signification. However, this does not mean that Genet attempts to free phonemes altogether from their place in the system of representation. In *Le Plaisir du texte*, where Barthes speaks of 'la valeur' which is 'passée au rang somptueux de signifiant', the signifier still contains value, it still represents (p. 103). The material aspect to the word is indirectly instead of directly metaphorical. All form is representation, all materiality is subject to contingency. 'Il est impossible de décrire valablement des faits de rythme littéraire sans tenir compte de l'intention générale d'un style,' writes Mourot³. He reveals Chateaubriand's rhythm to be metaphorical at a local level. Genet's contrastingly is of global significance. In order to elucidate this complex movement of refusal and recuperation of the metaphor I refer to Roland Barthes's description in *Le Plaisir du texte* of the sounds that surround him in a bar:

Jeu de dénombrer tous les langages qui entraient dans mon écoute: musiques, conversations, bruits de chaises, de verres, [...] en moi passaient les mots, les menus syntagmes, les bouts de formules, et aucune phrase ne se formait, [...] cette

¹ *Essais de linguistique générale*, p. 218.

² 'Le Secret de Rembrandt', p. 27.

³ *Le Génie d'un style*, p. 122.

non-phrase n'était pas du tout quelque chose qui n'aurait pas eu la puissance d'accéder à la phrase (p. 79)¹.

Homophonies, and for that matter all rhythmic structures in Genet's theatrical texts are as singular as the individual sounds of music, voices and glasses in Barthes's bar. And like the sounds in the bar Genet's structures refuse global articulation into the coherence of one harmonious chorus, of one single sentence. They are separate languages that do not enter into immediate dialogue with each other. This does not however preclude them from playing their part in the system of representation, from the possibility of being formulated. I explained in Chapter Four how fragmented roleplay impedes character and plot formulation and yet still signifies at a macro-level, by exposing the ritualisation implicit in our identity. Rhythmic structures similarly signify, in that they refuse to carry meaning at one level by refusing to be a support for metaphor, this drawing the spectator more to their material dimension. But at another level they reveal with greater clarity the nature of our existence. Resistance to metaphor at one level is therefore itself metaphorical at another. The phonemes /p/, /l/, /y/ and /u/ in the extract from *Les Paravents* do not metaphorically reflect any image in the scene in the way that Chateaubriand's homophones evoke a river, a crow, or whatever he is describing. However, Genet's very resistance to metaphor in itself serves metaphorically to underscore the nature of verbal language and of all social discourses for that matter, which are a series of repeated, empty rituals. Rhythmic patterns in Genet's theatre signify, by exposing metaphorically the role played by vapid form and ceremony in our lives. As well as expressing its own materiality, the structured signifier reveals the nature of all signification.

(e) Homophony: Personal Pronouns, Possessive Adjectives and the Artificially Quintessential Sign

The repetition of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives is the principal generator of homophony in Genet's theatre. In my last chapter I explained how polyphonic shifting fissures the speaking subject's utterance into several simultaneous voices. In this section I illustrate how Genet exaggerates this fissuring through the constant repetition of personal pronouns and possessive adjectives, this inevitably engendering incessant

¹ Barthes's italics.

alliteration of the /s/ of 'son/sa/ses', the /m/ of 'mon/ma/mes', etc. Genet distils textual elements into rhythmic structures that sap the subject of its substance and vitality, leaving only an echo of sound.

The shifter representing speaker- λ - the subject posing at the origin of the personal pronouns - is stylised, so that it not only represents the speaking subject, but also represents itself - its own acoustic materiality - sometimes at the expense of representing the speaker- λ . The shifters are hence perceived more in terms of their sound, than their representation of the subject. Solange in *Les Bonnes* exclaims:

Tu n'as donc pas vu comme elle étincelait! **Sa** démarche dans l'escalier! **Sa** démarche victorieuse! **Son** bonheur atroce? Toute **sa** joie sera faite de notre honte. **Son** triomphe c'est le rouge de notre honte! **Sa** robe c'est le rouge de notre honte! **Ses** fourrures... Ah ! elle a repris **ses** fourrures! (p. 96).

Alliterations of the /s/ of 'son' and of 'Solange' prevail throughout the maid's utterance. In addition, modulations of /s/ are found: /ʃ/ and /z/ are found in 'démarche' and 'victorieuse' respectively. Solange's utterance becomes an incantatory homophonic block. Discursive poetic form replaces the subject, as sound replaces sense. In other words, Genet reveals that the human condition is such that we are nothing more than the material manifestations that represent us, like the wrinkles that represent Rembrandt's Mrs. Trip.

In *Elle* Genet establishes a supreme paradox. Personal pronouns conventionally represent the subject in the absence of a proper name. In Genet's plays, personal pronouns cease to represent the subject, for they are noticed more as sound, as I have illustrated with reference to *Les Bonnes*. In *Elle*, personal pronouns cease to represent what the subject *itself* does not represent. Image represents more image, *ad absurdum*. Take the Huissier's lines, for example: 'Sa Sainteté. **Elle** avance, doucement portée par des nuées ou la poussière, **elle** glisse sur du feutre ou de l'huile. **Elle** coule debout sous de vastes portails [...] **Elle** entre. Deux hallebardes frappent les dalles' (p. 78). Lexical repetition of 'elle', enhanced by alliteration of the phoneme /l/, stylises the utterance, adding a layer of acoustic resonance to semantic signification. Homophonic repetition affords self-conscious opacity to the signifier. Genet heightens the sense of dislocation between the signifier and the signified, as the signifier begins to represent itself in excess of representing its subject. But from the outset, the signification of 'elle' itself is totally

dislocated from the referent, for the referent is the Pope, and is consequently male¹. Concrete form, in this case acoustic form, predominates, as the signified and referent become abstraction. Beyond the sounds of Genet's words, there lies no coherent meaning. By the same token, Genet indicates metaphorically to us that beyond form, there lies nothing; a metaphorical *vide*. By removing semantic content from personal pronouns and possessive adjectives as opposed to other morphemes, Genet makes a double statement on identity, for these words are no longer capable of representing their owners. No identity is inherent.

Shifters are by definition characterised by their lack of intrinsic signification: 'he', 'there' or 'it' can refer potentially to a host of entities. Through incantation Genet removes meaning even from proper nouns such as names. In *Les Bonnes* alliteration engenders a textual expansion of the characters' names in the same way that the /l/ of Leïla pervades *Les Paravents*. The phonemes /s/ from 'son/sa/ses' and /m/ from 'mon/ma/mes' are linked to repetition of the /m/ of Madame and Mademoiselle and the /s/ of Solange. In the following example alliteration begins with the /m/ of Madame, but as Solange's rage mounts and the ritual sacrifice of Madame approaches, the occurrences of /m/ are shot through with the /s/ and /l/ of Solange:

Hurlez si vous voulez ! Poussez **même** votre dernier cri, **madame** ! (*Elle pousse Claire qui reste accroupie dans un coin.*) Enfin ! **Madame** est **morte**! étendue sur le linoléum... étranglée par les gants de la vaisselle. **Madame** peut rester assise! **Madame** peut **m'**appeler **mademoiselle** Solange. Justement. **C'**est à cause de **ce** que j'ai fait. **Madame** et Monsieur **m'**appelleront **mademoiselle** Solange Lemerrier... (p. 105).

Two micro-systems, one expanded from the /m/, /s/ and /l/ of 'Mademoiselle Solange' and the other from the /m/ of the appellative Madame, clash with each other. Rhythmic homogeneity is resisted, as the two systems fragment the text. The strobe effect of polyphonic shifting that dominates the scene as the sisters slip in and out of playing Madame and themselves, is enhanced by the two inter-penetrating homophonic micro-systems, even if modifications to role and rhythmic structure are not in tandem. Solange continues: 'Maintenant, nous **sommes mademoiselle Solange Lemerrier. La femme Lemerrier. La Lemerrier. La fameuse criminelle. (Lasse.) Claire, nous sommes perdues**' (p. 109) Solange is lost as her identity is fragmented, frittered, emptied. The

¹ In his absence the Pope is referred to as 'elle', 'elle' being a pronoun replacing 'sa Sainteté'. Likewise the Cadi in *Les Paravents* is referred to as 'elle', replacing 'son excellence', even though he is a man.

material, acoustic dimension to the characters' names expands across the text. I stated in Chapter Three that the name is already in a position of dislocation with respect to the subject. The name is artifice, image, form. Genet enhances the form and not the content of the characters, by expanding homophonic networks from their names¹. To remove their names from the text is to remove the text and to remove them, leaving nothing at all, like to remove Mrs. Trip's wrinkles is to remove her altogether.

Instead of creating artificial naturalism, the consolidation of homophones into fixed structures constitutes artificial essentialism. The network of sounds dispersed across Genet's theatrical texts crystallises characters into artificially quintessential signs, only to reveal their essences as absent. Genet is inspired by the paintings of both Rembrandt and Giacometti. These two painters are able to encapsulate seeming essences. Of Giacometti's paintings Genet writes: 'vu à vingt mètres, chaque portrait est une masse de vie, dure comme un galet, bourrée comme un oeuf.'² Giacometti's details are like pebbles, so compact with sedimented, petrified ritual condensed into semiotic richness, that their reality and truth become artificially immutable. The notion of the weight and immobility of the artificially quintessential sign is elaborated throughout Genet's works. The Bishop in *Le Balcon* speaks of the 'raideur solonelle!' (p. 28) and the Photographer speaks of the 'image dé-fi-ni-ti-ve' (p. 120). In Genet's theatre each detail signifies with the intensity of Rembrandt's 'ornements' or Giacometti's 'masses de vie'. The relative amorphousness of words issued in everyday speech is ordered into highly structured micro-systems - syntagmatic and lexical repetitions, alliterations, assonances, rhythms, systematised prosodies, rhymes - each organised into an ornament. In the case of the above examples, phonemes from the names of the characters are arranged throughout the text, to form homogenous structures. Far from being a Balzacian quest for a 'realist' representation of the world we live in, Genet's attention to detail is

¹ Other examples include the following: Claire says to Solange when they clear up after the first ceremony: 'Mais j'en ai assez de ce miroir effrayant qui me renvoie mon image comme une mauvaise odeur. Tu es ma mauvaise odeur.' (p. 58.)

and:

CLAIRE	Je suis si lasse !
SOLANGE	Il est bien temps de vous plaindre. Votre délicatesse se montre au beau moment.
CLAIRE	Trop lasse ! (pp. 95-97.)

² Jean Genet, *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti* (Décines: Marc Barbezat, L'Arbalète, 1963).

the self-conscious distilling of the heterogeneity of our existence into an essential talisman, a corpus of meaning, a shrine to the falsity that constitutes the truth of our existence. This is reflected in Genet's structuring of rhythmic elements in the text. Beyond the fragmented materiality of the characters' names, their speaker- λ shifters, they are nothing.

(f) Rhyme

Genet sometimes takes homophony to its extreme and creates rhymes. It is clear that from one version of his plays to the next Genet modifies words or syntactic order with the intention of exaggerating homophonic repetition. 'Juge, Général et Evêque', written in the 1956 version of *Le Balcon* for example, is replaced by the 'rime pauvre' 'magistrat, soldat, prélat' in the second (p. 130). Along with alliterations, assonances and oppositions, rhymes - 'rimes pauvres', 'rimes suffisants', and 'rimes riches' - contribute towards the priming of textual elements into artificial essences. Rhyme in Genet's theatre is a yardstick with which to measure the ultimate triumph of sound over sense. In turn, rhyme serves to highlight the way in which all speech forms part of scripted social discourses. The homophonies often straddle separate characters' dialogues, thus confusing roles played and individuals playing them. In addition, the disproportionate amount of attention drawn to the signifier as opposed to the signified frequently generates humour, as I illustrate presently.

Grammatical opposition describes the homophonic relationship between words of the same grammatical category. Although the words might be opposed in their radical form, they are brought together through rhyme when conjugated or declined¹. Because French verbs are inflected, syntagmatic repetition often results in rhyme². In Félicité's rousing speech in *Les Nègres*, the use of the 'vous' form inevitably results in 'rimes pauvres' because all the final stressed syllables are homophonic³:

Dahomey! ... Dahomey! ... A mon secours, Nègres! [...] Nègres des Etangs, vous qui pêchez les poissons avec votre bec pointu, entrez. Nègres des docks, des usines, des bastringues, Nègres de chez Renault, Nègres de Citroën, vous autres aussi qui tressez les joncs pour encager les grillons et les roses, entrez et restez debout. Soldats vaincus, entrez. Soldats vainqueurs, entrez. Serrez-vous. Encore. Posez vos

¹ Jean Mazeleyrat, *Eléments de métrique française*, pp. 209-214.

² The 'nous' and 'vous' forms of the present for example end in '-ons' and '-ez' respectively, provided that the verb is regular. This means that verbs conjugated in the same person will inevitably rhyme.

boucliers contre le mur. Vous aussi, qui déterrez les cadavres pour sucer la cervelle des crânes, entrez sans honte. Vous, frère-soeur emmêlé, inceste mélancolique et qui marche, passez. Barbares, barbares, barbares, venez. Je ne peux vous décrire tous, ni même vous nommer tous ni nommer vos morts, vos armes, vos charrues, mais entrez. Marchez doucement sur vos pieds blancs (p. 80).

The dialogue becomes one homophonic block, an opaque ornament. The artificial essentialism effected by the repeated second person plural conjugation is further enhanced by other repetitions, for example of the preposition ‘des’ + noun (**des** docks, **des** usines...) and of the possessive adjective ‘vos’ + noun (**vos** morts, **vos** armes...). In addition, the /e/ of the ‘vous’ inflection is alliterated (Dahomey, **des**, **E**tangs, **les**, boucliers, déterrez, su**c**er, **des**, emmêlé, mélancolique, dé**c**rire, nom**m**er.) As I maintained in my second chapter, the black struggle for ‘real’ identity beyond imposed discourses is no more authentic than the white court against which it verbally jousts. The combination of ‘rimes pauvres’ and assonances reveals Félicité’s speech to be a ceremony and ritual that is no less of a show than the Queen’s tirades.

In *Les Paravents* the Lieutenant’s ‘rimes riches’, produced from a string of lexical oppositions sharing the same suffix, slip further and further into nonsense¹: ‘Travaillez vos cous. Par : tors**ion**, tens**ion**, contract**ion**, distors**ion**, suspens**ion**, press**ion**, flex**ion**, flux**ion**, masturbat**ion**...’ (p. 124). ‘Swelling’ and ‘masturbating’ are not the most obvious body-building techniques. The dynamic advancing the text is material, not semantic. Again, form makes a double statement, both on its own materiality and on the artifice of all communication.

I have mentioned that acoustic incantation does not directly mirror polyphony. Here, I portray the two systems as separate, and yet interpenetrating. The following ‘rime suffisant’ in Archibald’s prelude to Marie’s ceremonial sacrifice in *Les Nègres* is enriched because the four homophones, /s/, /i/, /ã/ and /s/ render the single heterophone /l/ negligible: ‘nous devons séduire : de la plante des pieds jusqu’à leurs oreilles, notre langue rose, seule partie de nous-même évoquant une fleur, se promène avec **science** et **silence** autour de nos beaux indifférents. La phrase convient-elle?’ (pp. 38-39). Archibald’s own metacommentary alerts the spectator’s attention to the polyphonic shifting between his roles of master of ceremonies and of black activist. The utterance in

¹Lexical opposition occurs when words with the same root are juxtaposed, for example ‘jours’ and ‘toujours’, or when words that share prefix or suffix are juxtaposed, for example ‘prévu’, ‘préparation’, ‘prédire’ (Jean Mazeleyrat, *Eléments de métrique française*, pp. 209-214.)

the role of master of ceremonies contains a rhyme. Genet's theatre is described by many critics as the alternation between the poetic and the prosaic. The presence of a rhyme in one of Archibald's roles and the absence in the other is not the manifestation of a poetry-prose juxtaposition. I argue that each and every element in Genet's theatre is concentrated into the creation of a seemingly quintessential poetic sign. The following example from *Les Paravents* serves to highlight the fact that all Genet's theatre is poetic incantation. The Lieutenant switches back and forth between trying to rouse military zeal amongst his legionnaires and getting dressed: 'Cuisses épaisses et dures. Ou apparemment. A la hauteur des genoux, sous la culotte... Preston ! ... mes bottes ! ... (*entre Preston qui s'agenouille devant l'officier et passe un chiffon sur les bottes.*)... sous la culotte [...]' (p. 124). The sudden bathos introduced into the Lieutenant's dialogue by the mention of his boots might be construed as an oscillation between the poetic and the prosaic. However, the 'rime suffisant' - 'culotte'/'bottes' - traverses the two roles played by the Lieutenant. Genet structures all phonemes into artificially quintessential signs. He illustrates the fact that all speech is artifice and all action is roleplay.

The impression that characters speak exclusively in terms of fixed formulae can produce effects both of desperation and of humour. The following example comes from a moment in *Les Bonnes* when Solange cradles her exhausted younger sister Claire after the first ritual enactment of the Madame-maid scene. The 'rime suffisant' incorporates homophones of /ã/ and of /ʒ/:

CLAIRE	<i>plaintivement</i> : Solange?
SOLANGE	Mon ange ?
CLAIRE	Solange, écoute (p. 61).

The two maids have supposedly abandoned roleplay in favour of a brief moment of sororal intimacy. The contrast is not however between roleplay and reality, poetry and prose. It is between roleplay and more roleplay, poetry and more poetry. Incantatory stylisation of the signifier prevails, regardless of the role. No role is more authentic, less artificial, less poetic than the next. Solange is thus unable truly to comfort her sister, for real, non-formulaic communication between individuals is impossible, as the overt use of stylisation here illustrates.

In Chapter Four I explained that Genet exploits the non-essentialist signification of utterances so that, within certain limitations, characters can decide how to interpret their interlocutors' lines. Homophony allows characters to steer the conversation in a direction that is more advantageous to them. The result of the string of intentional misunderstandings is that communication is forsaken and characters become more and more isolated. The two sisters in *Les Bonnes* both vie for the affections of Mario the milkman. While Claire plays Madame, she warns the 'vile' maid not to come too close, exclaiming: 'Ecartez-vous frôleuse!', to which Solange replies: 'Voleuse, moi?' (p. 25). Solange can position herself as the secondary person addressed, namely herself-as-Solange, as opposed to herself-as-Claire. This turns her sister's insult into a reference to the love triangle in which the two sisters are both caught: Claire and Solange are both in love with Mario the milkman. Like in the case of the communicational trope that I explained in my last chapter with reference to polyphony, rhyme affords an ambiguity that characters can exploit or misinterpret. One of the most exaggerated example of this occurs in *Les Paravents*, where La Mère's misheard words concatenate in a chain of sonorous homonyms which ultimately amount to farcical nonsense:

OMMOU [...] Que le soleil ré**fléch**isse et ses rayons, qui me font si mal
à la tête, à ma pauvre tête criblée de **flèches**...

LA MÈRE *en écho* : **lèche** !

SAÏD *même jeu* : J'ai la langue **sèche** (p. 265).

Reminiscent of polyphonic truncation where characters change the direction of the conversation by misinterpreting their interlocutors' utterances on purpose, this misunderstanding underscores the solitude of characters for whom genuine exchange is impossible. The more characters deviate from the norm and the more Genet the poet-saint becomes creative, the less communication succeeds. The more sophisticated the rhyme, the more it is dislocated from sense.

But the potential desperateness of the communication breakdown is often counter-balanced by Genet's playful appeal to humour. As I have mentioned, Issacharoff states that humour can be derived when the conventional balance between the referent, signified and signifier is tipped. In numerous cases in Genet's plays semantic inappropriacy and phonological predominance of the signifier lead to humour. The result of the farcical effects can be to shower ridicule on characters, plot and dialogics. In my

opinion however Genet's humour is ultimately not parody. In this example from *Le Balcon* humour is derived from the acoustic motivation of Irma's utterance:

L'ENVOYÉ	Qui voulez-vous sauver?
LE CHEF DE LA POLICE	La Reine !
CARMEN	Le drapeau !
IRMA	Ma peau ! (p. 104).

And when the Chef de la Police asks after the Queen and her subjects, her Envoy replies in a rhyme:

LE CHEF DE LA POLICE	Le Généralissime?
L'ENVOYÉ	Fou. Egaré dans la foule où personne ne lui fera du mal, sa folie le protège.
LE CHEF DE LA POLICE	Le Procureur ?
L'ENVOYÉ	Mort de peur (p. 105).

Rather than simply highlighting the arbitrariness of the relationships between signifiers and signifieds, Genet appears to reorganise these relationships to various humorous, and possibly fleetingly satirical effects. Power, like everything, is a game. By turning those in charge into reciters of empty rhyming riddles, Genet makes this point clear. In *Les Nègres* Christianity is shown in a ridiculous light through humorous rhymes. Words containing combinations of the phonemes that make up 'Marie' and 'prière' - both words of course bearing clearly Christian connotations - prevail throughout the scene at the white girl's house. Genet includes rhymes like 'pralines' and 'aspirine', chosen for their acoustic pertinence and their simultaneous semantic absurdity:

FÉLICITÉ	<i>imitant une malade plaintive, les yeux levés au plafond : Ma- a-arie! Ma-a-arie ! C'est l'heure de mes pralines et de mon aspirine, ma fille! Et c'est l'heure de la prière</i> (p. 68).
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In these examples from *Le Balcon* and *Les Nègres* power and religion are derided. However, political and religious parody are not the driving forces behind these plays. Genet prefers acoustic motivation over semantic motivation in the cases of 'drapeau'/'ma peau' and 'procureur'/'mort de peur' from *Le Balcon*, 'pralines'/'aspirine' from *Les Nègres*, and 'culotte'/'bottes' and 'torsion'/'suspension'/'masturbation' from *Les Paravents*, because the rhymes become *Verfremdungseffekte*, a means with which to underscore the artifice of form that prevails both on and off stage, in *all* situations.

Oppositions and rhymes, like the other repetitive figures I have highlighted, thus transform the heterogeneity of normal utterances into artificially essential poetic blocks. The traditional monolithism in poetic prose of one globalising accentual rhythm to which all other acoustic figures - morphological repetitions and homophonies - are subordinated, is dissipated by Genet into a multitude of varied rhythmic systems with multifarious types of signification attached. Stress patterns, which I now explore, also adhere to Genet's dynamic of tight structuring that cedes to sets of conflicting and discordant rhythmic structures.

(iv) Syllable Isometry and Stress Periodicity

Roger Blin testifies to the manner in which, from one version of Genet's plays to the next the playwright removes accessory elements to streamline syllable isometry and heighten the spectator's awareness of stress periodicity: 'Genet lui-même a retravaillé sur le texte et il a par exemple supprimé systématiquement tous les petits mots de liaison, les conjonctions ou quelquefois même les sujets qui lui semblaient alourdir les répliques.'¹ In this section I return to my extract from the Ninth Tableau of *Les Paravents* which poses as a fine example of Genet's meticulous attention to the positioning of stresses.

'Le sentiment du rythme dans une phrase française est [...] fondé sur la perception d'une série de rapports entre les nombres syllabiques de groupes délimités par leurs accents', writes Jean Mazeleyrat². Stress acquires semiotic worth contextually when

¹ *Souvenirs et propos*, p. 42.

² Mazeleyrat's italics, *Eléments de métrique française*, p. 14.

I establish the position of syllabic demarcations in order to recognise syllabic units in the text. This then enables me to ascertain stress position.

Each syllable is formed around a vowel, namely 'le point culminant de la syllabe' (Henri Morier, *Dictionnaire de poétique et de rhétorique*, 'Consonnes', pp. 203-297). A consonant, 'l'un des sons accessoires et transitoires possibles qui conduisent à cette ouverture maximale ou qui ramènent à la fermeture de la syllabe' is not essential for the formation of a syllable (Henri Morier, 1981).

In my study of stress periodicity I adhere to the following syllable counting rules (Frédéric Deloffre *Le Vers français*, 6th ed. (Paris: Sedes, 1973), pp. 143-146):

- There are as many syllables as there are vowels
- A consonant between two vowels starts the new syllable
- Should there be two consonants between the vowels, the first belongs to the preceding syllable, the second to the ensuing
- In the case of a cluster of three consonants, the first two belong to the preceding syllable, the third to the ensuing: 'obs-ti-né'. The exceptions are /l/ and /r/, which are paired with the consonant preceding them to form the start of the next syllable: 'en-tre-pris' or 'as-tral'

systematised. I try to demonstrate how the systematisation of metric structures coerces Genet's characters into speaking in a rhythmic straitjacket. Utterances are stylised into *Verfremdungseffekte*, which underscore the materiality of stress, and concurrently illustrate the impossibility of communication outside the strictures of pre-established forms. In the previous chapter I stated that polyphonic shifting illustrates the oscillation between the fixity of masks and the mobility afforded by changing masks. Rhythm highlights that same dynamic. The characters' obligation to conform with stipulated rhythms is contrasted with the constant shifting from one isometry to the next. The globalising limitations of one dominating rhythm are in turn avoided, for the theatrical text displays a plurality of different rhythms. Rhythm is replaced by a more celebratory variety of *rhythms*.

La Mère's utterance is the first in the extract to adhere to regular stress periodicity. Soon after, Leïla and the Gendarme become infected with her contagious isometry. La Mère's incipient words are:

Meter	Stress	Sentence ¹
3	1	Des années.
3	1	Des années
3	2	qu'elle est là,
3	1	la pendule.

The sentence is grammatically divided into segments, each of three syllables. Grammatical stress occurs every third syllable². Genet's prose here is cadenced.

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- In the case of a hiatus (e.g. 'lieu aussi') the *synaeresis* and the *diaeresis* occur. Clearly defined vowels for example in 'agréable' or 'aérien' do not pose problems. If however one of the vowels is /i/, /ü/, /u/ /o/ or /é/ there are two possibilities: the *diaeresis*, where the first vowel holds its own as a syllable (ri-
ons, avou-er), or the *synaeresis*, where the first vowel is only partly formed, becoming a semi-vowel or semi-consonant (tiens, ouest).

When the number of syllables is established, it is possible to see whether the syntagmas are *isometric* (possess the same number of syllables) or *heterometric* (of varying syllabic meter).

Individual syllables are grouped into clusters of not usually more than four or five. The 'coupe', or break is an abstract phenomenon that falls after the stressed syllable. It is the approximative separation line between measures. It is induced by meaning, grammar, syntax or punctuation. (Henri Morier: *Le Rythme du vers libre symboliste* (Geneva, Presses académiques, 1943-44), I, p. 50, and *Dictionnaire de poétique et de rhétorique*, article on 'Coupe'.)

¹ The main stress is highlighted in bold and secondary stress in italics.

² Mazeleyrat differentiates between three types of stress: 'grammatical', 'oratoire' and 'tonique' (*Éléments de métrique*, pp. 110-113). The 'accent grammatical' is 'celui qui marque les articulations de la syntaxe.' Stress in French generally falls upon the last non-silent syllable in a word. When a word is exaggerated for effect (**magnifique**), the stress, or 'accent oratoire' is displaced to the first syllable. In verse the poet can manipulate grammatical stress. A tension is derived between the 'natural' movement of the sentence and the artificial 'accent tonique' imposed by the poet.

According to Georges Molinié's definition, cadenced prose contains 'des retours de quantités syllabiques à peu près égaux, selon des régularités *plus ou moins exactes* mais en tout cas mémorisables, et avec d'éventuels supports d'identités ou de parentés sonores aux principales articulations'¹. Syllable isometry in this extract is approximative, yet sufficiently prominent to capture the spectator's attention. The approximation of Genet's isometry is immaterial to the spectator, who is hastened by the transience of the performance and is therefore unable to discern exactly how many syllables there are per sentence. Combined with the 'parentés sonores' - morphological repetitions and homophony - that I have already highlighted, meter and stress periodicity constitute rhythmic structuring that transforms utterances into incantation: into both sense and sound.

The disintegration of semantic signification in La Mère's utterance which I have illustrated with reference to lexical repetition, coincides with an emergence of highly structured, cadenced prose:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
5	2	'des <i>petites</i> roues,
5	2	des <i>petites</i> étoiles, ⁷
5	2	des <i>petites</i> vis,
4	2	des <i>petits</i> vers,
4	2	des <i>petits</i> clous,
5	2	des <i>petits</i> machins
5	2	y en avait plein ,
5	2	des <i>petits</i> ressorts,
4	2	des harengs saurs ,
4	2	<i>clés</i> à molettes.'

The final syllable of each syntagma carries the main stress². 'Petit' carries the secondary stress. Each syntagma is hence identically stressed, as syllable isometry automatically produces stress periodicity. As I have mentioned, in the earlier version of *Les Paravents*

Genet neither stipulates a shift of the 'accent oratoire' nor establishes an orthodox metric system that creates discordance between the 'accent tonique' and the 'accent grammatical'. Stress in his theatre is therefore grammatical.

I am aware that the determination of stress is disputed by phoneticians, who do not agree on its length, pitch and intensity. They never however deny its presence and worth in rhythm. I concentrate here on the indisputable capacity of stress to structure rhythm, and do not enter into a discussion on the actual quality of stress.

¹ My italics, Georges Molinié, *Dictionnaire de rhétorique* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1992), p.74.

² A syntagma is a syntactic unit containing two or more linguistic signs or elements (Oxford English Dictionary).

all occurrences of ‘petit’ remain in the masculine, thus increasing this isometry, since all instances of ‘petit’, whether masculine or feminine will contain the same number of syllables. The internal rhyme of ‘machin’ with ‘plein’, the lexical repetition of ‘petit’ as well as the alliterations and assonances, all draw the spectator’s attention to the signifier, as opposed to to the signified.

La Mère’s utterance slips from one fixed, artificially quintessential system to the next. Her stress now occurs every three instead of four syllables:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
3	1	cigarettes,
3	1	trottinettes...

This meter is adopted by the Gendarme:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
3	2	Où tu vas?

He continues, unable to escape the meter that impregnates each of the characters’ lines:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
3	2	Te sauver ! ...
3/4	2	Foutre le camp ! ...
3/4	2	Faire la malle ! ...
4	2	Tirer des pattes ! ... [...]
4	2	Révocation./ [...]
4	2	Petite ordure.
4	2	Et moi, trop con.

Like La Mère’s utterance, the Gendarme’s cadenced phrases measure three to four syllables, the main stress falling on the final syllable, the secondary falling on the first or second.

Towards the end of the extract the main stress occurs rigorously every four syllables, to the point where the prescribed meter and mandatory homophony of /y/ or /u/ occur at the total expense of semantic coherence:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
4	2	Un <i>peu</i> de vous,
4	2	un <i>jour</i> sur quatre
8	3	et le <i>tu</i> le reste du temps.

The isometry is broken at the end of the line, but then the Gendarme slips back into the previously established meter:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
3	2	<i>Nous et vous</i>
3	2	<i>on y gagne,</i>
3	2	<i>mais le vous</i>
3	2	<i>tout à coup,</i>

This line is followed by ‘à qui dire le tu?’, which again disrupts the overriding isometry. Rather than a move from poetry to prosaism I feel this constitutes a shift from one rhythmic system to another, because the interruptions of the rhythms resemble each other in meter each time, constituting an echo between interruptions. This endorses my claim that each and every element in Genet’s theatre is the result of meticulous poetic structuring.

The end of the extract represents a total triumph of the signifier over the signified. Words are selected almost exclusively for their adherence to stress periodicity and homophony. Incantation fissures the signifier into the representation of the signified, and the representation of itself. Each word measures one syllable. In each syntagma of four syllables a secondary stress falls on the second syllable, and the main stress falls on the final syllable. Stress consequently occurs in a sequence of stressed-weak-stressed repeated again and again, constantly drawing the spectator’s attention to the signifier, in an incantatory tirade:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
4	2	<i>Le tu nous plaît,</i>
4	2	<i>le s’il vous plaît</i>
4	2	<i>n’est pas pour nous.</i>

In my last chapter I demonstrated the manner in which roles are not character-specific. Syllable isometry traverses from one character’s dialogue to the next, rhythm and form thus portraying the spoken subjects more than any psychological characterisation Genet chooses to employ. Characters are portrayed as fragmented servants to a multitude of mastering rhythms. Leïla continues to the same rhythm as La Mère:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
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4	2	Le <i>mou</i> non plus
4	2	... Le <i>tout</i> non plou
4	2	... Le <i>vu</i> non plus.

... And La Mère continues with identical stress periodicity:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
4	2	Le <i>fou</i> c'est vous
4	2	... le <i>plus</i> c'est mou
4	2	... c'est <i>tout</i> au plus...

Finally, the Gendarme cannot help but speak to the same rhythm:

Meter	Stress	Sentence
4	2	Le <i>mon</i> c'est plou...
4	2	c'est <i>plus</i> mon cul...
4	2	Le <i>cul</i> mon coup...

Even the number of syntagmas in each utterance, three, is identical for each character. The pauses, indicated by suspension points, are identically positioned for each speaker. The fact that each character speaks to an identical beat reinforces the concept that the signifier is transferable and that the signified is relatively irrelevant. Every syllable in Genet's theatre plays its part in cadenced incantation. Yet again it is clear that real interactive exchange between Genet's characters is replaced by the recital of pre-ordained rhythmic structures. Individuals are replaced by indistinguishable mechanical puppets.

Rhythm fixes linguistic elements into artificially quintessential micro-systems. Rhythm also generates the movement between these systems. Rhythm in Genet's theatre is not the domination of one single syllable isometry over the text. It is the antagonism between submission to established discourses and the jubilatory possibility of passing between these discourses. It is the polymorphous *va-et-vient* between a multitude of different structures dispersed throughout the text, a multitude that excludes no spectator, as it appeals singularly to each one. Etymologically, rhythm is the momentary form assumed by a moving entity, rather than the actual mobility of that entity¹. Rhythm in Genet's theatre is an oxymoron. It involves both mobility and stasis. Each

¹ See Plato, *Les Lois*, Œ.C. (Paris: 'Les Belles lettres', 1951), II, part I, 665a, p. 55 and Emile Benveniste, 'La notion de 'rythme' dans son expression linguistique' in *Problèmes de linguistique générale I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 327-35.

systematisation of the signifier is characterised by the immutable fixity of an artificially quintessential structure. And yet each structure in itself is mobile because it is a rhythmical figure. In addition, the constant syntagmatic alternation between structures generates movement.

Regularity of syllables and stress inevitably produces regularity of prosody, which is the last rhythmical structure I analyse. I highlight its part in Genet's theatre and relate it to the success with which the playwright translates the written text to the stage.

(v) *Prosody*

In his *Critique du rythme* Henri Meschonnic underscores the inseparability of rhythm and prosody: 'Dans son acception large [...] le rythme englobe la prosodie.'¹ The regularity of syllable isometry and stress periodicity inevitably effects the systematisation of prosody. The voice follows the intonational melodic line along the *protasis*, namely the rise in vocal pitch which results in a minor cadence, and the *apodosis*, namely the fall in vocal pitch that results in the major cadence². If syntagmas or sentences of identical meter are repeated, as in the extract from the Ninth Tableau of *Les Paravents*, prosody is in turn repeated. Incantation and the effect of artifice are therefore enhanced, because the repetition of stress is followed by repeated intonational patterns.

Prose writers structure the symmetry of the protasis and apodosis to stylistic or dramatic effect in the same way as poets structure hemistiches. An exaggeratedly long protasis propels the tension forwards, thus maintaining the spectator's attention for the duration of the sentence. An elongated apodosis creates a sense of amplification or cascading. There is one instant in Genet's dramatic oeuvre where the minor cadence predominates, this being the final tableaux of *Le Balcon*. In my opinion it is no coincidence that these scenes are dramatically the weakest in Genet's theatre. Georges Bataille accuses Genet of not acknowledging the existence of his reader or spectator:

l'indifférence à la communication, la cloison vitreuse [...] qui nous sépare, lecteurs, de cet auteur. [...] Genet qui écrit, n'a ni le pouvoir ni l'intention de communiquer

¹ Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme* (Paris: Lagrasse, 1982), p. 255.

² The melodic line of the voice takes the following shape: Intonation, or the voice's pitch, ascends until the caesura, where the syllable is lengthened and stressed. This ascent is called the *protasis*. Intonation then descends, moving the sentence towards its semantic and prosodic conclusion. The descent in pitch is the *apodosis*.

avec ses lecteurs. L'élaboration de son oeuvre a le sens d'une négation de ceux qui la lisent.¹

Although I disagree with Bataille vis-à-vis most of Genet's dramatic oeuvre, which succeeds indisputably in appealing to the spectator's intellect, imagination and senses, I concede that the last tableaux of *Le Balcon* overlook the need to maintain the spectator's interest. This is perhaps due in part to too 'writerly' a use of prosody. Of *Le Balcon* Richard Coe writes: 'the play has depth and complexity, but the audience has to supply too many missing elements before these qualities can become fully apparent.'² From the Sixth Tableau onwards the play is extremely difficult to follow, not only because the spectator is forced constantly to reassess the status of characters who forever shift from role to role, but mainly because, apart from the dramatically effective photo session, incohesive and arcane exposés of lengthy political and ontological tracts are expressed in top-heavy sentences. Barthes writes in *Le Plaisir du texte*: 'ce lecteur, il faut que je le cherche, (que je le 'dague') [...] Ce n'est pas la 'personne' de l'autre qui m'est nécessaire, c'est l'espace' (p. 29). In theatre, where the audience does not have the security of the written sentence to check words that might have been missed, the author must fill the audience's 'space' of desire and interest. But its attention can be pulled forwards along the protasis only so far before the thread is lost. In the final tableaux of *Le Balcon* Genet displays an imbalance between the 'writerly' and the 'speakerly', putting too much of an onus on the spectator's concentration. I analyse one sentence amongst several that illustrate Genet's use of the minor cadence to ill effect. In this sentence from the Ninth Tableau the Bishop, Judge and General describe their triumphal parade through the streets:

La lenteur du carrosse ! [...] Un homme aurait pu couper le jarret des chevaux, tirer un coup de pistolet, détacher l'attelage, nous harnacher, nous attacher aux brancards ou aux chevaux, nous écarteler ou nous transformer en percherons : || rien (pp. 117-118)³.

The caesura is situated extremely late in the sentence, meaning that the conclusive information is not provided until the very last word, 'rien'. The first section of the sentence is so long that the spectator's concentration is over-challenged and interest is

¹ Georges Bataille, *La littérature et le mal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 98.

² *The Vision of Genet*, p. ?

³ I denote the caesura with the following symbol: ||.

lost before the concluding apodosis is reached. Dramatic effectiveness is thus forsaken¹. Theatre is an unforgiving art that requires immediate efficiency, or else the spectator is lost. The use of the minor cadence is one of the few exceptions to dramatic efficiency found in Genet's theatre. Theatre is 'un compromis entre deux langages', writes Pierre Larthomas in *Le langage dramatique*². Genet's theatre is the meticulous ordering of all textual and scenic elements into quintessential poetic signs. Genet is the 'irréfutable maître de sa langue comme on l'était au grand siècle'³. And yet for the most part his dialogues display a spontaneity and ease that makes the spectator forget the lines were ever written. Picon sums up perfectly the balance Genet attains between intricately sculpted poetic figures and the dance-like movement of the text: 'sa prose souple, ornée et légère, cérémonieuse et simple, solennelle avec grâce, familière avec hauteur'⁴. Genet himself writes 'l'écrivain ne sait pas comment sa phrase va se terminer, c'est en se lançant qu'il se retrouve'⁵. Genet's writing is clearly the product of scrupulous structuring, but its theatrical efficacy lies in its impression of spontaneity and immediacy. With the exception of the minor cadence used in *Le Balcon*, Genet exploits prosody to successful dramatic effect by creating relatively symmetrical sentences that for the main part require the spectator neither to refer too far backwards nor too far forwards in the sentence. He does not tend to direct tension forwards to leave the spectator in anticipation. Nor does he supply the spectator with details that require recapping and synthesis of past information. Words seen in the immediacy of the present enjoy reduced signification and referentiality in terms of elements that precede or follow them. Genet's symmetrical prosody therefore affords added materiality to the signifier, for the spectator is not encouraged to make such excessive thematic links forwards or backwards as he/she might be, were the major or minor cadences used. Genet prosodic dynamic enables sentences to advance in bursts. His theatre is centred around the notion

¹ Another example is provided by the following sentence: the Bishop expresses his caution regarding taking over the 'real' episcopal seat: '[...] Vous évoquiez cette soirée fameuse où dépouillé - ou dépiauté, prenez le mot qui vous amuse - de nos ornements sacerdotaux, || nous avons dû danser nu sur les places espagnoles' (p. 130). The protasis stretches the spectator's attention forwards for too long before the sentence is resolved. As Coe indicates, the spectator is forced to fill too many gaps.

² Pierre Larthomas, *Le Langage dramatique* (Paris: A. Colin, 1972), p. 25.

³ Claude Bonnefoy, *Genet*, p. 132.

⁴ Gaëton Picon, *Panorama de la nouvelle littérature française*, quoted by Edmund White, *Jean Genet*, p. 363.

⁵ *Lettres à Olga et Marc Barbezat*, letter dated 1962, p. 262.

of the *hic et nunc*. It is about the concrete presence in the *present*, and his prosody for the main part enhances this.

So, rhythm in Genet's theatre is the stylising of textual signifiers - phonemes, syllables and morphemes - into individual artificially quintessential rhythmic structures. A multitude of rhythmic micro-systems is dispersed throughout the text, each expanding a central morphological, homophonic, accentual or prosodic matrix, and consequently resisting the globalising forces of one rhythmic macro-structure. The constant shifting from one rhythmic system to another is a source of discontinuity that reflects the fragmentation of the speaking subject, who is composed of as many disparate systems as the text is. The shifting is also a celebration of mobility, as no one single structure dominates the text for long before it cedes to another.

Morphological, homophonic and accentual repetitions produce incantation. Incantation transubstantiates the signifier, affording it an opacity that enables it to signify its own materiality, and metaphorically to portray discourse as revolving around a closed circuit of social ceremony. Real interactive exchange between Genet's characters is replaced by fixed, pre-ordained rhythmic structures. Exaggerated repetition can lead to the emptying of the connotative, denotative and even grammatical dimensions of the signified. And yet a sense of desperation is often allayed by the humorous effects produced by these exaggerations.

Genet denies not only Cratylism, but also artificial naturalism, by resisting the signifier-signified metaphor. Dislocation of the signifier and the signified is aided instead of allayed. Rhythmic structures consequently do not contribute towards characterisation. Their non-verbal materiality is thus allowed to assert itself. In addition cross-role and cross-character repetitions such as rhymes underscore the abolition of character specificity.

I now explore the effects upon the spectator of Genet's rhythmic structures. I assess firstly the possibilities for integrating the spectator that are afforded by refusing direct metaphorical connotation, this leading me to take into account the fact that in theatre, through the articulation of phonemes the signifier is made into an actual physical, audible presence. I investigate the effects of foregrounding this signifier.

II. Rhythm and the Spectator

(i) Resistance to Metaphor and the Spectator

I have stressed throughout this chapter that rhythmic structures are not directly metaphorical: syllable isometry and stress periodicity traverse individual characters, who all speak to the same rhythm, for example in the case of Leïla, La Mère and the Gendarme in *Les Paravents*. Characters echo each other's rhymes, for example in the case of 'procureur'/'mort de peur' in *Le Balcon*. Characters repeat each other's words or sounds, like with 'vu'/'entendu' from *Les Paravents*. Rhythmic structures are not the property of individual characters or roles. This resistance to metaphor at a local level enables the spectator to be incorporated into the theatrical performance at another level, as I explain.

Genet's highly structured, stylised dialogues are, and are not truthful representations of Blacks, bishops and the bourgeoisie. Genet runs the gauntlet of criticism directed at his representation of Blacks in *Les Nègres*. He defends his use of non-naturalist poetic dialogue in the play: 'Si quiconque venait me dire que les Noirs ne parlent pas comme ça, je lui conseillerais d'aller poser son oreille contre leur coeur, car c'est exactement cela qu'il entendrait. Il faut être capable d'entendre ce qui n'est pas formulé.'¹ By employing rhythmic structures Genet dislocates his characters' dialogues from the prosaism of everyday speech. Rhythms do not serve to reflect character traits. A regular rhythm does not denote a calm and collected character; a staccato rhythm does not denote a contentious character. In an interview, Genet explains his perception of the relationship between the theatre and life:

le théâtre que je préfère, c'est justement ce théâtre qui saisit la société en diagonal. [...] Ma démarche par rapport à la société [...] est oblique. Elle n'est pas direct. Elle n'est pas non plus parallèle, puisqu'elle traverse le monde, elle le voit.²

Genet does indeed represent human beings and the human condition, contrary to certain criticisms. But his representation is indirect, oblique, diagonal. His rhythmic structures

¹ 'Par lui-même', p. 22. Genet expresses a similar sentiment concerning *Les Paravents*, which 'doivent rappeler, appeler l'Algérie par des procédés que les Algériens ne connaissent pas' (*Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 15). And about *Les Bonnes* he writes: 'un critique théâtral faisait la remarque que les bonnes véritables ne parlent pas comme celles de ma pièce : qu'en savez-vous? Je prétends le contraire, car si j'étais bonne je parlais comme elles.' (*Les Bonnes*, p. 10.) Genet's characters are to convey a certain truth through the artifice of their oblique and non-naturalist representation.

² *Jean Genet*, Documentary by Michel Van Zele, 1995.

are not analogies that are readily attributable to particular characters. Each spectator must comprehend what is not formulated, says Genet regarding his Blacks in the quotation above. His mistrust of facile, trite representations leads him to refuse a synthesis of form and content into coherent and parallel systems, into readily recognisable Blacks and bishops. 'La simplicité dans "l'apparaître", c'est toujours la dissimulation de la vérité', writes Genet about Giscard d'Estaing who to Genet's mind wishes to appear 'splendide et simple', but consequently deceives the voting public¹. Genet's character descriptions on stage are neither cosy nor straightforward. The rhythms of their dialogues are discordant with the semantic content of their words and with their gestures, as I illustrate in my final chapter. His stylised, fragmented *rhythms* as opposed to rhythm in turn take into account the spectator's own rhythm. Dispersed, non-metaphorical rhythmic structures refuse the monolithism of unequivocal hermeneutics. But Genet's refusal of simple metaphorical mirroring enables the audience to formulate a multitude of different opinions that Genet himself has refused to synthesise. Through stylisation of the signifier Genet dislocates the semantic from the semiotic at one level, thus empowering the spectator to formulate at his/her own level. Genet scripts the spectator into the role of co-creator of the theatrical performance, allowing the plurality of differing voices at differing rhythms represented by the audience to establish their own relationships between incantatory rhythms and thematic content, and ultimately to be incorporated into the spectacle.

(ii) Incantation as Artifice

(a) Rhythm, the Body and the Soul

Martin Esslin alludes to incantation in Genet's theatre: 'in the world of prelogical thought, dream and myth, language becomes incantation instead of communication; the word does not signify a concept, but magically conjures up a thing.'² Contrary to Esslin's suggestion, Genet's incantation does not constitute a dichotomy in opposition with communication. Rhythmical incantation is not transmental transmission. It adds layers of artifice as opposed to removing them. Rhythm is said by certain poets, dramatists and

¹ Jean Genet, 'Et Pourquoi pas la sottise en bretelles?', *Humanité*, 25 May 1974, in *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 137.

² Martin Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* (Middelsex: Penguin, 1980), p. 232.

theoreticians to be an extension of the natural pulsations or movements of the body or soul. I seek to refute these opinions and to depict Genet's rhythm as pure artifice, and not physicality.

In the works of several writers rhythm is portrayed as the direct, undistorted expression of the soul, of the body or of nature. In *Réflexions sur le théâtre* the prolific actor Jean-Louis Barrault, who played amongst many roles Si Slimane in *Les Paravents*, defines rhythm as an 'état lyrique : élargissement de l'âme qui fait que l'Etre tout entier devient Rythme.'¹ For him rhythm emanates from the soul. In his study of rhythm in Proust's works J. Mouton appears to be of a similar opinion. He writes: 'les sinuosités du rythme ne sont-elles pas provoquées par les mouvements mêmes de l'âme?'². For Henri Morier on the other hand rhythm beats in time to the natural world:

'Du balancier de l'horloge à l'accord de la harpe, de l'influx cérébral aux vagues de l'éther, et des clartés visibles aux lumières invisibles, toute la nature frémit d'un rythme universel. Dans le dernier caillou, les satellites de l'atome poursuivent une ronde inexorable et sans terme [...]. Partout rythme et vie s'accompagnent.'³

This decidedly empiricist conception of rhythm appears to underlie the works of Paul Claudel, for whom rhythm is an expression of the human body. In *Réflexions sur la poésie* he proposes a phenomenological correlation between textual rhythm and the heart:

L'expression sonore se déploie dans le temps et par conséquent est soumise au contrôle d'un instrument de musique, d'un compteur. Cet instrument est le métronome intérieur que nous portons dans notre poitrine, le coup de notre pompe à vie, le coeur qui dit indéfiniment :

Un. Un. Un. Un. Un. Un.
Pan (rien) Pan (rien) Pan (rien).⁴

Rhythm for Claudel finds its Cratylist origin in the human heart. For the poet this essential, vital relationship between rhythm and the body explains the human attraction to poetry, music and song. In the book the title of which speaks for itself, *Plaisir poétique et plaisir musculaire*, André Spire attempts to qualify scientifically the Claudelian belief in the relationship between rhythm and the body, stating that rhythm is

¹ Jean-Louis Barrault, *Réflexions sur le théâtre* (Paris: Jacques Vautrain, 1949), p. 127.

² J. Mouton, *Le Style de Marcel Proust* (Paris: Corrêa, 1948), p. 113.

³ Henri Morier, *Le rythme du vers libre symboliste et ses relations avec le sens* (Geneva: Les Presses académiques, 1943-1944), I, p. 24.

⁴ Paul Claudel, 'Réflexions et propositions sur le vers français', in *Réflexions sur la poésie* (Paris, Gallimard, 1963), p. 11.

the expression 'de tout notre être'¹. Spire provides largely approximative and subjective sophist evidence of the links between rhythm and what he sees to be discernible and predictable articulatory and gestural movements in observed subjects (p. 462). In theatre, where rhythmic structures are projected physically into the audience, the concept of dialogues somehow deriving from or accessing the mind and body of each spectator might appear seductive. Whether or not these psycho-analytical or socio-physiological claims can be substantiated is irrelevant to this study of rhythmic structures. For Genet to uphold the view that rhythm possesses any inherent mental or physical impact on the spectator would betray his firm belief in the non-essentialism of all representation. Rhythm is not an uncoded, pure expression of the soul, the body, the heart, or nature.

(b) Rhythm and Music

Rhythm is frequently said to be employed owing to the musical appeal to the senses it possesses. Poetic rhythm and music have often been aligned with each other. Barrault draws a parallel between theatrical rhythm and music: 'Ce qui est beau c'est la réalisation humaine d'un orchestre de chambre laissant ainsi s'épanouir grâce, instinct, passion et en dessous : lucidité; devenir : Musique'². The rhythm of Genet's theatrical texts is described by some critics as having the appeal of music. Incantation in particular could be confused with musicality. Richard Coe's description of *Les Nègres* alludes heavily to music and dance. He writes: 'the words sway and pulsate like African dancers.'³ He concludes that the play has more in common with music than with theatre. And in *Jean Genet: Poètes d'aujourd'hui* Jean-Marie Malgorn writes: 'Genet ou le grand maître des voix, de la musique vocale, des chants choraux'⁴. Allusions to music are clear. I counter these misconceptions of incantation in Genet's theatre. The origins of poetry are found in music. In Greek mythology poetry retraces its roots to Orpheus the lyre player and poet. But in the first instant music is no less codified and socially constructed than any other form of expression. There is therefore no reason why it should be more immediate, less formulated than verbal language. Secondly, from the point of view of Genet's theatre, incantation has a clear advantage over music: in addition to being material and

¹ André Spire, *Plaisir poétique et plaisir musculaire* (Paris: Corti, 1949), p. 291.

² *Réflexions sur le théâtre*, p. 182.

³ *The Vision of Genet*, p. 102.

⁴ *Jean Genet*, p. 80.

potentially semiotic like music, linguistic rhythm also provides semantic possibility. Genet's incantation is not the prelogical, essential expression that Esslin describes above. It is a pluridimensional form that capitalises on the semantic, the semiotic and the material properties of language.

Jacques Audiberti, often considered to be one of the founders of the French Nouveau Théâtre, writes about the primacy of tangible visual and acoustic form in his own theatre: 'ma manière d'écrire n'est pas exactement celle d'un écrivain; c'est plutôt celle d'un manipulateur de ces objets solides qui sont les mots. La forme y a toujours le pas sur le fond.'¹ Genet contrastingly does not systematically prioritise one code over another. At times, for example in my extract from *Les Paravents*, he subverts the habitual hierarchy so that sound occupies a higher priority than sense. For the main part however Genet indiscriminately plunders the richness of all scenic elements at his disposal. He refuses the pre-eminence of one overriding structure, meaning that his texts cannot be described as 'musical', for they are far more than just sonority. A plurality of different verbal and non-verbal forms is foregrounded through poetic structuring and stylisation. The interplay between the simultaneously material, semantic and semiotic leads to incantation, to the theatrical experience whereby the spectator sees a word simultaneously as rhythmical sound, denotation and connotation. Rhythm is an added shifting layer that allows for multiple signification.

The physical, material dimension to rhythm is undeniable. Rhythm in theatre is sound. And yet it is not tangible. The uniqueness of rhythm in theatre is not its musicality, its transmental, prelogical incarnation of body and mind. Rhythm is theatrically effective because of its ability simultaneously to be two things at once, as I explain.

(iii) Rhythm: Materiality, Multiplicity and Duality

In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* Genet explains the theatricality of the simultaneous presence of form, and knowledge that this form conceals nothing, namely that without it there is recourse to nothing:

¹ Jacques Audiberti, *Entretien avec Audiberti sur le métier d'écrivain*, quoted by Geneviève Serreau, *Histoire du Nouveau Théâtre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

Les prisons ont leurs histoires silencieuses, et les gâfes, et les soldats de plomb même, qui sont creux. Creux! Le pied d'un soldat de plomb s'étant cassé, le moignon montra un trou. Cette certitude de leur *vide* intérieur me ravit et me désola... (p. 177)¹.

I explain this oscillation between form and the hypothetical *vide* with respect to Genet's theatrical rhythms, which are at once a presence that surrounds the spectators with sound, and a visual absence that metaphorically points to the *vide* that subtends all form.

Whilst much of Barrault's dramaturgy is to my mind devoid of watertight theory, the actor has an admirable ability to convey the intensity of feeling experienced during a theatrical performance, and for this reason his works are useful. With respect to the tangible aspect to words in theatre he writes: 'C'est par leur vertu respirée et par leur densité plastique que les voyelles et consonnes explosent dans les coeurs'². For Barrault the acoustic dimension to words in theatre is concrete and tangible. In his article *Texte et espace*, the theoretician Jean-Pierre Ryngaert explains that the theatrical space is unique for it is able to 'exister en tant que lieu d'inscription du texte.'³ The theatre is multi-dimensional, a concrete space, the same concrete space occupied by the spectator. Ryngaert explains that the implicitly physical aspect to actor's voice means that the dramatic text becomes reified, 'indépendant' in the auditorium. Throughout this chapter I have illustrated the ways in which Genet's rhythmic structures affirm their own materiality through morphological, phonological, accentual and prosodic repetitions, and through the refusal of direct metaphorical signification. For Ryngaert, who speaks about theatre in general, this opacity of the theatrical signifier produces 'une capacité particulière à se cristalliser en eux-mêmes et pour eux-mêmes, et donc à exister fortement dans l'espace de jeu en tant que tels'⁴. In the same article Ryngaert alludes to an 'épaisseur phonique du texte dans la matérialité de l'espace' (p. 96), this echoing Barrault's sentiment that words take on a material dimension in theatre. Ryngaert refers to words as 'bulles', which detach themselves from the actor and travel towards the spectator. He quotes the director Claude Régy:

¹ My italics.

² *Réflexions sur le théâtre*, p. 179.

³ Jean-Pierre Ryngaert, 'Texte et espace: sur quelques aventures contemporaines', *Pratiques* 41 (March 1984), p. 96.

⁴ 'Texte et espace', p. 97.

A travers les acteurs un matériau fluide, celui qui s'échappe des mots, circule dans l'espace où sont inclus les spectateurs. Les acteurs n'incarnent pas, et pas plus que la 'mise en scène' ils ne doivent pas se prendre pour l'objet du spectacle.¹

The signifier is a material, concrete presence that fills the theatrical space. Maria Casarès's voice when she plays the Pope in *Elle* is said by a critic to “‘hache le silence” à grands coups de cognée’². In any theatre the acoustic dimension of words is sensed as a concrete presence by the spectator. In Genet's theatre, where specific attention is paid to the creation of rhythmic chains, this effect is heightened.

Gérard Genette speaks of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations that derive from the contextualisation of words. He describes the resultant textual network as spatial:

En distinguant rigoureusement la parole de la langue et en donnant à celle-ci le premier rôle dans le jeu du langage défini comme un système de relations purement différencielles où chaque élément se qualifie [...] par les rapports verticaux et horizontaux qu'il entretient avec les éléments parents et voisins, il est indéniable que Saussure et ses continuateurs ont mis en relief un mode d'être du langage qu'il faut bien dire spatial.³

The horizontal and vertical axes that contribute towards textual referencing afford spatiality to language. To my mind rhythm adds a third dimension to this space. In the case of theatre, the flatness of the textual page becomes animated. Genette's criss-cross becomes a multi-dimensional network that literally surrounds the audience in non-verbal, acoustic form. The vast plurality of different rhythmic structures that constitute the multiple layers of Genet's representation are thrown out into the auditorium. Their diversity forms a spatial net that is cast, to catch the multitude of singular interpretations that each spectator supplies.

Verbal rhythm has an implicitly dual status, that serves to illustrate the concept of the *féerie* and the *vide*. Firstly rhythm is both sense and sound, as I have stated. Secondly, it is both acoustic presence and visual and tactile absence. It both ‘cache [...] and délivre [...]’ as Ben Jelloun writes in the opening quotation to this chapter. This duality is of philosophical impact as well as theatrical efficacy. Rhythm is metaphorically the simultaneous manifestation of the two tenets of Genet's reality: form,

¹ Régy's italics, Claude Régy, ‘Comment je fais une distribution’, *L'Annuel du théâtre* (1982-82) p. 28, quoted by Jean-Pierre Ryngaert, p. 96.

² Michel Cournot, ‘Les Oiseaux de Saint Père: *Elle* à Gennevilliers’, *Le Monde*, 6 October 1990.

³ Gérard Genette, *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 45.

namely the *féerie*, and its notional, hypothetical alternative, the *vide*, that in fact is born of the *féerie* - the bank of images constructed by socialised beings. In *L'Etrange mot d'...* Genet writes of the 'architecture verbale - c'est-à-dire grammaticale et cérémoniale - indiquant sournoisement que de ce *vide* s'arrache une apparence qui montre le *vide*' (p. 172)¹. Genet establishes the metaphor of the *vide* simply to illustrate that beyond the 'architecture grammaticale' or stylised rhythmical structures and the 'architecture cérémoniale' of inherited rituals and social discourses there lies nothing at all, in the same way that the lead soldiers with which Genet played as a boy are metal shapes that conceal and reveal the abstraction of thin air. Derrida's *Glas* highlights Genet's obsession with the dual states of presence and absence, belief and disbelief. He describes Genet's texts as 'dans le paraître, absence, partie'². He explains that Genet's preoccupation with flowers and flatulence is their odour³. And his interest in odour is its olfactive presence and concurrent visual and tactile absence. Derrida describes smell in Genet's works as 'non-essence : son odeur en tant qu'elle s'évapore' (p. 82). We simultaneously experience the smell, and nothing: the *féerie*, and the *vide*. I attempt to view acoustic rhythm in a similar light to Derrida's theory on odour in Genet's works.

Rhythm embodies the 'puissance du paraître' of which Ben Jelloun speaks. It is unique because it is acoustic presence, and yet it is magically beyond the audience's grasp. It bears the power of pure appearance. As Régy states, sound is released from the

¹ My italics.

² *Glas II*, p. 20.

³ Amongst a multitude of examples of how odour permeates Genet's works, take the titles of two of Genet's novels, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* and *Miracle de la rose*. Flowers constitute a salient feature throughout Genet's plays. In *Haute surveillance* Yeux-Verts held a lilac bloom between his teeth when he committed his murder, and Maurice's gesture of flicking his fringe symbolises this bloom (pp. 32 and 54. The symbolisation of the fringe-flicking is explained by Lefranc in the 1949 version of the play). In *Les Bonnes* Madame's apartment is filled with, amongst other flowers, 'mimosas', the name of which derives from 'to mime', because of their high sensitivity to touch and light, both of which induce reactions in them. They are a symbol of non-essence in mimesis in the works not only of Genet, but of Ponge and Derrida. In *Le Balcon* Carmen's Virgin Mary guise features flowers. In *Les Nègres* the catafalque is covered in 'des fleurs en bouquets : iris, roses, glaïeuls, arums' (p. 19). In *Le Baigneur* Roger makes 'des marguerites, des pensées, des anémones', out of beads (p. 38). Finally, in *Les Paravents* La Mère wears a violet and Warda, whose name in Arabic means rose, wears her namesake flower. Smells of other varieties prevail throughout Genet's works. In *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* Genet writes: 'J'ai déjà dit comme j'aime les odeurs. Les fortes odeurs de la terre, des latrines, des hanches d'Arabes et surtout l'odeur de mes pets.' (p. 173). Several references to smell are made in *Le Funambule* (pp. 20-21). And in *Les Paravents* the legionnaires pass wind over the dying General, and finally in *Les Bonnes* the maids speak of the smell of the kitchen drains. Odour for Genet is theatrical, for it is simultaneous presence of smell and absence of appeal to any other sense.

actor, and like an odour is detached from its source¹. Genet writes in *L'Etrange mot d'...* that 'de ce vide s'arrache une apparence qui montre le vide' (p. 172). Genet's performative act of systematising phonemes, morphemes and stresses into rhythmic structures consciously attracts the spectator's attention to the form he creates, self-consciously drawing attention to the hypothetical alternative, which is 'nothing'. The rhythmic structures both assert their own materiality and highlight an absence behind the form. Stylised rhythm, like odour in *Glas*, allows Genet metaphorically to illustrate to the spectator that beyond his *féerie* of alliterations, stresses and prosodic regularities that fly through the auditorium, lies nothing at all, this *vide* being represented by the visual absence that accompanies sound.

III. Conclusion

In the opening lines to *Le Funambule* Genet writes: 'Une paillette d'or est un disque minuscule en métal doré, percé d'un trou. Mince et légère, elle peut flotter sur l'eau' (p. 9). Each one of Genet's rhythmic figures is an ornament, or a sequin, a disc of plastic, an artificially structured, perfect quintessence of our existence of falsity, that is expanded from a morphological, phonological or accentual central matrix, to form a truth. Sequins reflect the light and efface the body they conceal. The beauty of Genet's structures renders the signifier opaque, at times effacing the meaning that it carries, whether direct or metaphorical. Like the shimmering pattern sequins make when sewn side by side, a mobility is afforded by Genet's movement from one rhythmic structure to the next. Genet explains how the tightrope walker's sequins are light and float on water. His rhythmic structures detach themselves from the actor, and physically float into the auditorium in a multiplicity of directions. Like each sequin that catches the light in its own way, rhythmic structures refuse the unifying forces of one rhythmic super-structure. Each structure is perceived by each spectator in a singular way. Like sequins that all reflect the light on their own terms, the only common quality that Genet's centrifugally dispersed, fragmented, rhythmic structures share, is their part played as costume, mask, artifice.

¹ Régy's italics, *Comment je fais une distribution*, quoted by Jean-Pierre Ryngaert, *Texte et espace*, p. 96.

Incantatory rhythmic structures are both material form, and the affirmation of the artifice of all form.

Rhythms in Genet's theatre are like fragments of glass within the confines of a discursive kaleidoscope. They can never be removed, but can constantly move, creating a multitude of varying patterns and shapes.

*

In my next chapter I illustrate how the opacity of the signifier and the resultant resistance to metaphor and incorporation of the spectator, are effected through other non-verbal forms in addition to rhythm. I analyse how Genet achieves these dramatic effects through the actor's performance, through set and through costume design.

Chapter Six

Production and Performance

‘Chaque objet possède sa propre
magnificence, ni plus *ni moins grande* que
celle de tout autre.’

Jean Genet, ‘Le Secret de Rembrandt’¹.

‘Ce sont les costumes et le décor qui communiquèrent les deux tiers de la vérité’, writes a critic on a production of *Les Paravents*². In my last chapter I illustrated the way in which Genet formalises each and every textual element, to highlight the material and the scripted dimension to communication. Theatre is the privileged site of plurality. It is made up of colour, gesture, movement, sound, costume and tempo³. The epigraph to this chapter indicates Rembrandt’s attention to each and every element on his canvas, whether content or expression. Genet himself recognises the importance of *all* objects on stage, not least non-verbal objects, as he stylises all forms self-consciously, to emphasise their, and our artifice.

In my last chapter I described Genet’s rhythmic structures in terms of singular, independent verses, each shining as brightly as the next, none relating metaphorically to each other. Equally, paradigmatic coherence between Genet’s formalised poetic colours, gestures and sounds are reduced to a minimum. In Genet’s own words:

La féerie dont je parle [...] est dans une voix qui se casse sur un mot - alors qu’elle devrait se casser sur un autre - mais il faut trouver le mot et la voix, elle est dans un geste qui n’est pas à sa place à cet instant.⁴

The actor’s gesture, pitch, tempo, walk and costume all affirm their own material presence and resist contribution towards drawing the contours of character or plot. An

¹ Genet’s italics, p. 35.

² Charles Marowitz, writing about Peter Weiss’s production of *Les Paravents*, ‘Notes sur le Théâtre de la cruauté’, *Les Paravents, Obliques*, 2 (1972), p. 57.

³ I define ‘gesture’ as movement of the arms, and ‘movement’ as displacement of the whole body, for example in walking or dance.

⁴ Jean Genet, ‘A Antoine Bourseiller’, *Du Théâtre*, 1, (July 1993).

actor's intonation pattern for example must appear discordant with the words he/she utters. This affords an opacity to the signifier, which acts not merely as the material support for the signified. Colour can represent itself as colour, gesture as gesture, tone as tone. This results in a 'grotesque' hybridisation of styles that illustrates the site of the body as a fiction upon which Genet projects multiple layers of disparate signs¹. No matter how many layers of costume, false hair, etc. are added, nothing beyond surface artifice is ever attained.

The heterogeneous material forms dispersed across Genet's stage allow each spectator to create his or her own spectacle. Genet refuses a clear, readily recognisable complicity between his poetic signs, in turn affording the spectator the opportunity to investigate his/her own notions of coherence by piecing together the disparate colours, movements and rhythms. Genet's directors, designers and actors also leave their mark on Genet's productions. Patrice Chéreau, a director of *Les Paravents*, says: 'pour la première fois de ma vie, j'ai mis en scène une pièce où il y a des morceaux que je ne suis pas sûr de comprendre.'² Genet's stage directions are meticulous and exhaustive, and yet through their frequent ambiguities they resist the closure of prescription. Genet leaves space for his directors, designers, technicians and actors to write in their own stage directions. He has the following words of praise for his director Roger Blin:

Dans *Les Paravents*, tout est votre réussite. Si j'avais pensé que la pièce puisse être jouée, je l'aurais faite plus belle. [...] Vous avez, sans y toucher, pris la difficulté, et vous l'avez faite légère. C'est très beau. Vous avez [...] mon admiration.³

These words mark Genet's acknowledgement of the indispensable part he considers directors and designers to play in his productions. I base my study of movement, costume and set in this chapter of course upon the plays themselves, and in addition on my interpretation of Genet's own dramatic theory, set out in *Lettres à Roger Blin*, 'Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert' and in his other theoretical texts such as the Rembrandt articles. I also allude to programmes and reviews of productions, in order to see in practice the flexibility the playwright affords his directors and designers.

¹ I employ the term 'style' with reference to my definition of 'stylisation' set out in Chapter Three. 'Style' defines Genet's arrangement of signs in order to draw attention to their poeticity.

² Patrice Chéreau, quoted by Arnaud Malgorn, *Jean Genet, Qui êtes-vous?*, p. 89.

³ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 42.

In this chapter I thus explore Genet's approach to performance, notably his reconfiguration of the actor's body and voice, and I analyse production predominantly in terms of set, as I trace the evolution of scenography in Genet's dramatic oeuvre. Genet gradually fills every cubic inch of his set with a lattice network of lines and signs. He designs sets that are not fixed. They contain a multitude of symbols that he reconfigures constantly in a celebration of non-essentialist, mobile meaning production.

I. The Actor: Body and Voice

(i) Identity Production

(a) The Body as Fiction

Every gesture, every inflection of the voice on Genet's stage projects bodily movement as codified praxis, ritualised performativity. I define what I understand by corporeal morphology in Genet's theatre, and show how the actor's body and voice illustrate this definition.

In the 1956 version of *Le Balcon* the Sixth Tableau ends with a debate between the three characters Larmes, Sang and Sperme¹. Genet's use of esoteric intertextual poetic metaphor renders this discussion cryptic and consequently dramatically ineffective, probably explaining why Genet removed it from the revised edition of the play. The ontological debate in this tableau nonetheless provides an insight into Genet's conception of the body. Sang wishes to escape symbolic representation and enjoy the fullness of being as blood: 'il y a longtemps que j'attendais ce moment de m'échapper du verbe...'. Larmes interrupts him to say that the three humours' names condemn them to an eternal death-by-representation: 'Nos beaux noms nous condamnent à la nuit, proche de la mort.' To my mind Genet reveals the source out of which these humours flow to be 'les Dieux': image and myth, and not any fount of 'natural' organic matter. Genet himself is the product of state institutions and not a womb, as Sartre stresses in Genet's biography². Genet is a 'saint' and not a 'son'. His genesis resides in myth and not in nature. Genet replaces

¹ *Le Balcon*, 1956, pp. 110-111.

² See chapter entitled 'L'Enfant mélodieux mort en moi bien avant que me tranche la hache' in *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr*, pp. 9-25.

the geography of the body with the hagiography of a mythical construction. This biographical detail might inform Genet's representation of the body, which in his poetic attains corporeality through symbolic representation. 'Comme vous, comme la mort, je me sens prisonnier d'une longue utilisation décorative', says Sang. Without inherited social constructs eyes cannot perceive, hands cannot feel. Our bodies are born of artifice. Our only understanding is attained through codification.

From a thematic perspective the body in Genet's oeuvre is a sterile, hollow surface devoid of any Freudian organic and sexual energy¹. The Policeman in *Splendid's* alludes to the absence behind the outer shell of clothing and decoration: 'Ça m'est égal de parler à une robe vide, à des bijoux sans supports visibles, à un éventail qui ne cache rien' (p. 90). Beyond the images designed to represent the body's different aspects, we are unable to perceive any reality. Genet illustrates this metaphorically by implying that behind the clothes and physical features of his characters there lies no 'real' body. There lies nothing. Genet's theatre is the 'cérémonial de la Vanité et du Vide' in the words of Gilles Sandier². Behind the 'décoration' of which Sang speaks in *Le Balcon* - behind the papal robes or Warda's gold dress - beyond our socially constructed image of the body, Genet proposes an equally discursively constructed *vide*³. There is no alternative to the perception of the body as a codified fiction.

¹ Sex in Genet's works is either unconsummated or homosexual, or else it takes place between prostitute and customer. It is therefore always sterile. By way of example, Yeux-Verts in *Haute surveillance* and Madame in *Les Bonnes* are separated from their spouses; neither Saïd and Leïla in *Les Paravents* nor Roger and Chantal in *Le Balcon* consummate their relationships; and Village and Vertu's love in *Les Nègres* is exposed as an inauthentic charade.

² Gilles Sandier, 'Genet un exorciste de génie', p. 70.

³ The Pope in *Elle* is 'vêtu d'une longue robe blanche cachant ses peïds, il semble glisser sur le sol.' (p. 43.) Behind his papal attire there are no functioning limbs. There is nothing, save a pair of roller skates. For Warda in *Les Paravents* a prostitute's duty is to elaborate the image of a prostitute, and not to provide sexual satisfaction for her customers: 'Warda qui devais de plus en plus m'effacer pour ne laisser à ma place qu'une pute parfaite, simple squelette soutenant des robes dorées' (p. 199). Her words echo those of the Policeman in *Splendid's*. If one removes the accoutrements, one removes the being, in a similar manner to that described in Chapter Five with reference to Rembrandt's Mrs. Trip, who would disappear were her wrinkles to be removed.

(b) Costume and Identity Production

Characters on Genet's stage obtain identity through their clothing, wigs, make-up and jewellery. This process of decoration acts as a metaphor for Genet's conception of identity being the product of layer upon layer of social sediment.

In 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt' Genet describes the moment when he realised that identity was not inherent, but acquired: 'chaque homme n'avait peut-être de précieux et de réel que cette singularité : "ses" moustaches, "ses" yeux, "son pied-bot", "son bec de lièvre"' (p. 28). Identity is not what one is, but what one has, one's outer appearance. To have a particular bodily feature, or to assume a particular item of clothing is to be possessed by the archetypal image implicit in that feature or item. That feature is the property of society and not of the individual, hence Genet's inclusion of inverted commas around "club foot", "hare lip", etc. By multiplying the number of features and items, one magnifies the image of presence. I provide a few examples from the many that traverse Genet's oeuvre, of characters who overtly accumulate accessories, and in turn externalise the performativity of identity production: In *Haute surveillance* Lefranc frequently puts on the jacket of the man he idolises, Yeux-Verts, in the hope that he might acquire the latter's kudos as well as costume (pp. 45-46). Genet symbolises the acquisition of identity by means of a jacket being put on. Characters often layer up their clothing to symbolise the millennia of socially constructed fictions sedimented upon the human body. The two sisters in *Les Bonnes* 'déforment, monstrueusement, pour leur jeu, les robes de Madame, en ajoutant de fausses traînes, de faux jabots' (p. 11)¹. Genet frequently uses false teeth and wigs to exaggerate the notion of identity as the product of artifice. In *Les Bonnes* Madame wears a wig². In *Le Bagne* one of the prisoners, Funck makes himself a kind of toupee to supplement his pubic hair, out of pieces of string: 'il relève sa chemise et l'on voit une énorme touffe de ficelle effilochée' (p. 82). The Pope in *Elle* has false teeth (p. 36). In *Le Balcon* the towering stature of the three clients is fake, for they are mounted on 'de hauts patins' and wear shoulder pads to increase their image of eminence³. For similar reasons in *Elle* the Pope is elevated on

¹ In this chapter I leave quotations from stage directions in italics specifically to enable the reader to recognise that they are taken from Genet's directions or production indications.

² 'Les siens sont faux', observes Claire speaking of Madame's hair (p. 62.)

³ 'Comment jouer *Le Balcon*', p. 10, and stage directions, p. 20.

roller-skates. In *Les Paravents* Monsieur Blankensee bolsters up his figure with strapped-on cushions. Warda in *Les Paravents* wears such high platform shoes that she cannot walk¹... Clothing and wigs are devices that Genet employs in order self-consciously to expose the trickery and falsity that underlies the process of identity production. Clothes and accessories not only stand merely for themselves, their own materiality in Genet's theatre: they become emblems for the artifice that is inherent in all bodily identification.

Characters both acquire layers of clothing, wigs and make-up, and shed them and swap them. The movement from costume to costume reminiscent of the polyphonic and rhythmical shiftings I illustrated in Chapters Four and Five, produces a mobility that shatters the stasis of essentialism. A tension is therefore established between the desperate attempts to acquire identity by covering the body anxiously in layer upon layer of clothing on the one hand, and the freedom to change this clothing and hence to change one's identity on the other. In *Les Nègres* Village likens his race to a glove: 'Ténèbres, mère auguste de ma Race. Ombre, tunique exacte qui me gante de l'orteil à la paupière' (p. 46). And like a glove identity can be removed and replaced. The Policeman in *Splendid's* switches from crime-fighter to criminal. 'Je me retourne comme un gant', he says (p. 87)². In *Les Bonnes* Claire climbs out of Madame's dress after the first ceremony and back into it for the final ceremony. In *Le Balcon* the audience witnesses the three clients undressing at the end of their roleplays. During the tableau from *Le Balcon* I analysed in Chapter Four, the audience sees Irma undress and dress up as the Queen. The performative acts of dressing and undressing are as significant as the items of clothing worn, for they illustrate the potential anxiety of artifice which denies us permanence, but which is coupled with the liberating potential for mobility.

When characters put on a new set of clothes, the old set is often still visible below, for example when Claire puts Madame's dress over the top of her maid's uniform. The visual consequence of characters donning an eclectic combination papal

¹ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 25.

² Gloves prevail throughout Genet's works. The tightrope walker's costume in *Le Funambule* fits him like a glove (p. 22); Solange in *Les Bonnes* wears rubber washing-up gloves; Diouf wears white gloves in *Les Nègres* when he plays Marie; Sir Harold leaves his 'gant de pécar' hanging in a tree, to guard over the working Arabs in his absence.

robes and roller skates, uniforms and stilts, maid's outfits and velvet curtains, is an impression that I choose to describe as 'grotesque'. With reference to the acting style that Genet suggests, which is equally influenced by mismatching styles, I discuss the impact of heterogeneity on both Genet's characters and his spectators.

(ii) Gesture and Movement, and the Grotesque

Roland Barthes describes the acting style in the director Roger Blin's *Les Nègres* as a 'gaucherie intelligente'¹. Characters in Genet's theatre are fragmented into multiple and contradictory roles that result in a style of acting that Genet himself defines as awkward or clumsy, as I explain. This 'clumsy' approach to acting both draws attention to itself as material form, and is an 'intelligent', more far-reaching statement on the ritualisation of all actions.

In an interview with Madeleine Gobeil Genet explains the relationship he believes to exist between the act of stealing, and clumsiness:

il y a dans le fait de voler une obligation de se cacher. Si on se cache, on se dissimule une partie de son acte, [...] il faut nier en se cachant. Quand on fait quelque chose en se cachant, on le fait toujours maladroitement, je veux dire toutes les qualités ne sont pas utilisées.²

The incongruous combination of an innocent child and a thief results in a hybrid state of incompleteness. One identity does not fully conceal the other and the dual image of boy and criminal gives an air of 'clumsiness' in Genet's opinion. The simultaneous presence of several identities all supported by the body of a single actor leads to a similar impression of gaucherie. Genet describes his own theatre by saying: 'c'est un théâtre qui [...] était certainement maladroit. Etant maladroit, il gagnait peut-être quelque chose de nouveau parce qu'il était maladroit.'³ The unlikely sight of for example a black man playing a white girl or a woman playing a dog, leads to a heterogeneous and 'clumsy' style of acting. For Genet, this style 'adds' something to the spectacle. I explain presently what it is I feel he adds.

In 'Pour jouer *Les Nègres*' Genet requests the use of a 'grotesque' approach to movement and gesture (p. 10). The literal meaning of grotesque in literature is an

¹ Roland Barthes, 'Le Balcon de Genet: Mise en scène de Peter Brook au Théâtre du Gymnase', *Théâtre populaire* 38 (1960), pp. 96-98.

² 'Entretien avec Madeleine Gobeil', p. 13.

³ Jean Genet, Interview with Nigel Williams, BBC, 1985, in *L'Ennemi déclaré*, p. 22.

aberration from the desirable norms of harmony, balance and proportion, often for sardonic or satirical purposes¹. This definition is not pertinent to my study, for *Les Nègres* is described as 'grotesque', but this does not exclude the possibility for grace, harmony, balance and elegance. In fact, Genet writes in *Les Nègres*: '*mettre beaucoup de grâce dans les deux menuets, et dans les chants*' (p. 10). And in *Les Paravents* Saïd is on the one hand gauche and on the other 'il prendra des postures de samouraï vainqueur' (p. 15). 'Grotesqueness' in Genet's theatre is therefore not a value judgement on aesthetics². In pictorial art the term refers to the intermingling of images portraying humans, animals and vegetation. I employ the latter, visual definition, namely that grotesqueness is a pluralistic hybridisation of styles, in order to explain the 'grotesque' with respect to the actor's performance.

Genet's acting style issues from a disparate combination of roles in the same way that a grotesque painting mixes themes and subjects. His theatre is therefore characterised not by one single 'gauche' acting style, but by a plurality of disparate styles, be they graceful or not, that result in a sort of clumsiness. In the stage directions for *Haute surveillance* for example Genet writes '*les acteurs essayeront d'avoir des gestes lourds ou d'une extrême fulgurance et incompréhensible rapidité*' (p. 12), and in *Les Paravents* he writes: 'après un mouvement très vif, marquer, par la lenteur, la solennité' (p. 93). Actors alternate continuously between tempos and tones, to afford an impression of hybridity. The eclectic collection of costume accessories, the role swapping and the rhythmical modifications, to which I have alluded, of course all add to this effect of grotesqueness.

The grotesque as I choose to define it is represented better than by anyone, by the circus clown. For this reason to my mind the clownesque features heavily in Genet's dramatic repertoire. The acting style of the clown has inspired playwrights such as Jarry, Cocteau, Beckett and Ionesco, and directors, like Chéreau. The awkward, heterogeneous concoction of true-to-life and caricature, comedy and tragedy, invective mockery and light-hearted entertainment, renders a clownesque

¹ J.A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1992).

² For *Les Paravents* for example, Genet writes: '*Aucun visage ne devra garder cette beauté conventionnelle des traits dont on joue trop au théâtre comme au cinéma*' ('Quelques indications', pp. 10-11). Genet's characters do not display stereotypical beauty, but they are nonetheless aesthetically appealing.

acting style ideal for Genet's theatre of constant shifting. *Les Nègres* carries the subtitle 'clownerie' (p. 5), and in *Les Paravents* Genet requests 'une façon clownesque' for the scene when the Arab women chase La Mère from the village square (p. 71). Clownery is grotesque because it is subjected to multifarious clashing influences. To define the acting style in Genet's theatre as clownesque is therefore to realise that there is no one overriding distinguishing style. I provide several examples of the see-saw between different styles that characterises Genet's theatre.

The two opposing motifs of agility and sclerosis are often juxtaposed on Genet's stage. The impression is one of grotesqueness. In the 1958 version of *Les Bonnes* Solange stiffens her body before drinking the suicide cup of tea. In *Le Balcon* Roger's expression must bear the 'fixité des masques', and during the finale to each illusion enacted in Irma's *Maison d'Illusions* the customer exits the stage 'aussi rigide qu'un cadavre' (pp. 11 & 50). During the Bishop's roleplay, Irma 'bougera à peine', and in the Fifth Tableau she and Carmen are instructed by Genet to stand rooted to the spot on several occasions (pp. 21 & 67). In *Elle* the Pope is 'percluse' due to his sciatica, and the Photographer 'se fige, immobile', as he listens for the Pope's footsteps (pp. 27 & 30). Even though the Pope is mounted on roller-skates, he himself is 'immobile' for much of his time spent on stage (p. 45). *Les Nègres* begins in the following way: 'La Cour, debout, et sur un seul rang, semble intéressée par le spectacle des Nègres dansant qui, tout à coup, s'immobilisent, interrompant le menuet', and throughout the play, the Blacks frequently interrupt their actions with a static pose (pp. 23 & 29). In *Les Paravents*, when Warda raises her hat pin her customers 's'immobilisent et la fixent' (p. 33). And when Saïd enters his house the spectator perceives the enormous shadow his body casts across the back of the stage. The shadow remains totally still (p. 42). Finally, during the graveyard scene Si Slimane stands 'immobile, figé' as La Mère 'tourne en dansant, d'un pied sur l'autre' (p. 92). The alternation illustrated in these examples between accelerated movement and statuesque pose does not necessarily look clumsy. It could be balletic and elegant. For *Les Paravents* Genet requests elegance: 'le style général sera d'une très grande noblesse : ampleur, traînes, drapés, même si tout cela accroche la poussière et la paille.'¹ The desired effect is to preclude the possibility for a homogenous acting

¹ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, pp. 12-13.

style. Here in *Les Paravents* for example the elegance is juxtaposed with dust and straw stuck to trains and veils. Not only does Genet refuse naturalist acting, but he also refuses any single monolithic style at all, instead insisting on a plurality of different styles. ‘Grotesqueness’ resists the strictures of a definitive definition.

Yawning and lethargy are other leitmotifs that run through Genet’s plays. In *Les Bonnes* the sisters are listless after their ceremony; the very first words of *Elle* are pronounced by the Usher in a yawn; and whilst waiting for the Pope, the Photographer also yawns. Vertu recites the Queen’s speech in *Les Nègres* because the latter has nodded off (p. 52). Vertu’s tone is ‘*somnambulique*’. In *Le Bagne* Frisson and Nestor ‘*bâillent beaucoup*’ (p. 19); in *Les Paravents* the characters yawn as they approach definitive death... The sleepiness to my mind does not carry metaphorical significance. It represents nothing except its own materiality as acting style and its contrast with other styles.

This list of instances where immobility and lethargy are juxtaposed with frenzied action is not exhaustive. Its purpose is to serve as a striking indication that an alternation between different types of acting and different tempos is prominent. The effect of this heterogeneity on the spectator is twofold. Barthes describes the acting style in *Les Nègres* as a ‘*gaucherie intelligente*’ as I have stated. On the one hand Genet prevents ‘intelligent’, conventional interpretation of the acting style by scuppering any spectator’s attempts to interpret gestures metaphorically. This is done by scrambling messages through the hybridisation of styles. On the other hand Genet makes an ‘intellectual’ comment on the nature of our existence. I explain this potential paradox. In his comments on the scene from *Les Paravents* in which the Arab women chase La Mère from the village square, Genet writes: ‘le public doit savoir qu’il s’agit d’une sorte de jeu’ (p. 71). Although it is tempting to attribute metaphorical signification to the recurrent motifs of immobility, lethargy and frantic movement, no tidy paradigm unites each instance of a particular style. At a straightforward level, immobility could represent the fixity of society’s rituals. Or Saïd’s flamingo pose could constitute an intertextual reference to the immobile swan embroidered in the centre of the Queen’s handkerchief in *Le Balcon*. However, I feel that the immediately discernible effect of the actor’s immobility and lethargy, which are frequently interspersed with rapid movement such as dance - as in the cases of La

Mère and Si Slimane in the graveyard scene of *Les Paravents* - is to create a clownesque, grotesque, hybrid acting style. At one level these effects refuse to represent anything except their own material form. Genet claims that his theatre is but a game, that in some respects goes no further than the opaque materiality of its disparate gestures. In another respect however, Genet's is an 'intelligent' game that the spectator must take seriously.

In his comments on the graveyard scene between the dead man Si Slimane and La Mère, Genet writes: 'je voudrais que le public sût qu'il s'agit d'un jeu (cette évocation d'un mort) mais je voudrais aussi que ce Jeu l'émeuve au point qu'il se demande si, derrière ce Jeu, se cache une réalité' (p. 93). The representation of the deceased Si Slimane, like everything in Genet's theatre, must be marked by its own artifice. The actions on stage must not serve exclusively to advance the play's narrative, and must not serve only towards building up characterisation. However, because Genet's literary works make it clear that our socialised world is made up of inherited rituals, habits and ceremonies, and is no less 'artificial' than the evocation of death on stage, we must realise that behind this 'game' of disparate gestures and movements lies the only reality we are able to grasp. The artifice on stage is an overt equivalent to the illusory make-believe that constitutes our lives. Klaus Grüber's production of *Splendid's* provides a most illustrative metaphor for Genet's light-hearted and yet serious grotesque acting style. Pierrot wobbles farcically across the stage, as if on a tightrope¹. Like all Genet's actors he teeters unsteadily between roles, in this case between the roles of hard-nut gangster and snivelling coward. He appears grotesque because he is the simultaneous manifestation of the multiple images projected onto his body. He is the jocose clown in a game of roleplay, a serious game in which we are all players.

The unlikely combinations of mismatching clothes and the incessant alternation between different acting styles thus produces clownesque characters, who

¹ Klaus Grüber, *Splendid's*, Théâtre de l'Odâtre de l'Odéon, 1995. In Chapter Four I allude to Genet's symbol of the tightrope, featured most prominently in *Le Funambule*, as the line between the solitude implicit in communication because we must repeat meaningless rituals, and the added solitude caused by a transgression of the rules, that inevitably leaves the individual misunderstood by others. Here, the tightrope constitutes a dividing line between different roles. The tightrope could also be interpreted as the notional frontier between the image and the *vide*. Genet's tightrope emblem is flexible like the wire itself, and variable like the acrobatics performed by the artiste.

illustrate the disparate influences out of which both they, and we are engendered. Intonation and tone are used by Genet to similar effect.

(iii) Tone and Tragedy

Tone is characterised by oscillation in Genet's theatre. He describes the fluctuation as tragedy. An explanation of this term enables me to shed further light on the significance of the grotesque in his theatre. In Chapter Four I employed the term 'intonation' to refer to the manner or mood in which lines are uttered. Here, I use the 'tone' to describe the vocal pitch and voice quality employed by the actors during performance. In all his plays Genet requests that the actor's voice distinguish itself from that employed in everyday speech. The voice is stylised, attention thus being drawn to its acoustic dimension. However, by alternating between tones Genet succeeds even further in underscoring the grotesque falsity of his actors' voices. The alternations become of more note than the tones themselves.

Genet stylises the voice in two stages. Firstly, all voices on his stage are to be marked by their falsity. For example, in *Lettres à Roger Blin* Genet writes 'la voix des acteurs viendra d'ailleurs que du larynx : c'est une musique difficile à trouver.'¹ Sir Harold and M. Blankensee speak 'd'une voix très aiguë : ils crieront presque, rageurs, comme le général Franco à la radio espagnole', and Saïd and Leïla's lines should be recited as if they were in an opera². In *Haute surveillance* the actors are to modify their vocal pitch: 'S'ils peuvent, ils assourdiront le timbre de leur voix' (p. 12), as they must do in *Les Bonnes*: 'Quelquefois, les voix aussi seront comme suspendues et cassés' (p. 7). The actor's voice is not merely a vehicle that carries the utterance. It is in addition perceived in terms of the signifier.

Secondly, the self-consciously false-sounding vocal quality is to be interrupted by other tones that are equally false-sounding. This goes even further towards underscoring the material dimension to the actor's voice. The actors playing Sir Harold's Arab labourers in *Les Paravents* contrast between low and falsetto pitch: 'Les Arabes parleront d'une voix très fragile, qui se brise par instants, par moments

¹ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 12.

² 'Commentaires du dixième tableau', p. 118, and Jean Genet, 'Pour Blin. Des réflexions à mesure qu'elles me viennent', in *La Bataille des Paravents*, p. 20.

une voix de fausset.’¹ Song is sometimes interjected, to constitute a contrast with spoken utterance. In *Les Paravents* Saïd sings when taunting Leïla about her ugliness (p. 44). The wives of the Arabs who visit Warda’s brothel sing their embittered lines². The dead Pierre sings a song filled with fatuous Western images, about his beloved Boulogne (p. 243). The constant alternation means that spectators cannot attribute certain pitches, for example a shrill voice, to specific characters. Vocal pitch consequently represents characters less than it represents its own acoustic dimension.

Genet frequently describes the tone of his theatre as ‘tragic’. For *Les Nègres* he stipulates a tone reminiscent of traditional tragedians: ‘*Sur quel ton réciter : bien imiter les Tragédiens et surtout les Tragédiennes-Français*’ (p. 10). Rather than being an indication of genre, I employ the unique use of the term tragedy to shed light on precisely why Genet prefers alternating pitch and tone. In his comments on *Les Paravents* he defines tragedy in the following way: ‘Je crois que la tragédie peut être décrite comme ceci : un rire énorme que brise un sanglot qui renvoie au rire originel, c’est-à-dire à la pensée de la mort’ (p. 71). An association can be made with Genet’s concept of the ‘jeu’ to which I have alluded. Performance on stage is but a game. Laughter here is the metacommentary that self-consciously highlights the falsity of the proceedings on stage. And yet this game is serious, for it is no different from the roleplay and ceremony that constitute our lives. Genet writes: ‘En quelque sorte chaque comédienne devra dire ses répliques comme si, intérieurement, un rire énorme la faisait pouffer’³. Simultaneous grave and jocular states prevail throughout Genet’s oeuvre. In *Les Nègres* the Blacks laugh in unison at the white Queen’s fear that the girl Marie might be savagely murdered (p. 24). When Village enters Marie’s home with malicious intent, the same orchestrated laughter is heard (p. 66). The two convicts Ferrand and Franchi in *Le Bagne* allude to the jets of blood they witnessed at the recent beheadings, through ‘*un éclat de rire*’ (p. 25). And at the end of *Les Nègres* the crowing cock, the augur of the inescapable perpetuity of discursive form, is met by bellows of laughter vociferated by all the Blacks on stage (p. 116). Like everyone, they have failed to forge their own black identity, but they laugh in the face of this

¹ ‘Commentaires du quatrième tableau’.

² Genet’s note in text margin, p. 232.

³ Comments on *Les Paravents*, p. 71.

inevitable impossibility. Genet elaborates artifice on stage, and makes the spectators aware that it is but artifice by using the metaphor of laughter. We must surrender to the inevitability of death without redemption from fixed social norms. But Genet sees no point in despairing. Instead, he laughs.

The clownesque combination can take place between game and gravity, pleasantry and sobriety as I have shown. The importance however lies not in the types of tone or intonation, but in the oscillation between tones and intonations. Modification along the syntagmatic axis makes for a grotesque discordance between vastly differing pitches. The pitch systems are not necessarily in tandem with polyphonic systems, gestural styles or rhythmic structures, and hence resist contributing towards shaping characters in the conventional sense. During the scene from *Les Paravents* between the Gendarme, La Mère and Leïla that I analyse in Chapter Five, it is impossible to claim that the tone changes Genet stipulates mirror the semantic or thematic content of the scene. 'Après l'échange des tu et des vous, il faudrait un léger calme, et un silence, puis, sans qu'on l'ait prévue, l'explosion enragée du gendarme.'¹ The tones appear to have been chosen arbitrarily by Genet. They are thus freed from the obligation of signifying content, and can further promote their own acoustic presence. Genet also introduces discordance on the paradigmatic axis, between the content of the actor's utterance, and the tone adopted in the delivery of the lines, as I illustrate.

In *Haute surveillance* Genet demands that the literary 'writerliness' of the dramatic text be contrasted with a working-class accent: '*Le texte est établi dans le français habituel des conversations et orthographié exactement, mais les acteurs devront le dire avec ces altérations qu'y apporte toujours l'accent faubourien*' (p. 12). Equally, in 'Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*' an antagonism between the dramatic text and the actor's utterance is suggested, as Genet describes the workaday tone with which the more poetic passages should be delivered:

Quant aux passages soi-disant 'poétiques', ils seront dits comme une évidence, comme lorsqu'un chauffeur de taxi parisien invente sur-le-champ une métaphore argotique : elle va do soi. (p. 9)²

¹ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 44.

² The same disparity between tone and utterance is prescribed for the scene in *Les Nègres* in which the white Queen and Félicité conduct their verbal joust. The future of the black and white races hangs on their

Genet's text and the actor's utterance are dislocated through the use of incongruous, unexpected tone. The tone, mood, accent or intonation is also fractured syntagmatically, as I have indicated, through alternation. The result, as with costume, gesture, movement and vocal pitch, is a foregrounding of the material dimension of form. The grotesque heterogeneity of styles in one respect prevents the spectator from attributing a specific pitch of voice or manner of moving to a particular person's character. Consequently, these facets of the actor are perceived in terms of their material dimension. The actor's clownesque voice and body movements signify in excess of themselves. They form part of Genet's tragedy, a tragedy that reveals constantly its status as artifice, but laughs at this inevitable falsity.

Grotesque combinations of manners, modes and styles hence dominate costume, gesture and tone. The final aspect of the actor that I examine in terms of its eclecticism is tempo. Tempo variation differs from the other facets of the actor I have mentioned, for it is the one non-verbal signifier that affects the intelligibility of the verbal text. The other components of the actor's delivery might detract from the verb by drawing more attention to themselves, but they do not impede comprehension. For this reason, Genet's exploitation of tempo variation merits a detailed study.

(iv) Tempo: Trance or Code?

In Genet's theatre the often erratic tempo of both non-verbal movement and gesture and of verbal utterances, contributes invaluable and uniquely towards the effect of hybridity in the acting style¹. Frenzied tempo could be misconstrued as Artaudian trance or a 'Happening'. I show how the tempo in Genet's theatre, however frenzied, is always part of a complex system of formalised codes, and is never an attempt to transcend codification. Genet scrambles one code namely the verbal, through exaggerated acceleration of line delivery. But he merely replaces this code with another equally codified system of dramatic signs, in this case tempo.

The significance of tempo in Genet's theatre is illustrated merely by indicating the frequency with which the author mentions this device in stage

every word, and yet Genet demands that the lines be delivered in a matter-of-fact tone: '*elle [la Reine] et Félicité vont se parler comme deux femmes échangent des recettes de ménagère*' (p. 106).

¹ Tempo can be defined as the rate or pace, either *allegro* or *lento*, at which the theatrical text progresses.

directions. The tempo of *Les Bonnes* alternates between swelling, frenetic speeds and languid exhaustion. In *Les Nègres* the tryst between Vertu and the white Queen marks the point at which the tempo accelerates. Genet writes: '*Toute la troupe, dès lors, va être animée d'un mouvement de plus en plus délirant*' (p. 57). Genet adds numerous annotations concerning tempo to *Les Paravents* when he revises the play, this confirming the important part tempo plays. For example, he adds to the First Tableau that it must be played: '*très allegro [...] rieuse*' (p. 25)¹. Words like 'délirant' might give the impression that Genet incites an Artaudian abandon of reason. Frenetic tempo is employed by Artaud and his school as a means to access some kind of higher consciousness. I allude briefly to this aspect of 20th century theatre, so as to illustrate how Genet's motivations for the use of tempo modification differ radically from those of the Artaudian school, even though superficial similarities might be deceptive, and even though certain critics might interpret frenzied tempo in Genet as trance².

For Artaud in *Dossier du Théâtre et son double* the microcosmos of the body's organs reveals an empirically objective macrocosmos: 'Il y a dans le théâtre l'appui primordial du corps qui répartit ses souffles, de telle sorte qu'on peut localiser géographiquement la culture, créer une véritable hiérarchie organique des connaissances et des sentiments.'³ For Artaud expression through the organs - breath and movement regulated by the body's pulse - avoids the distance inevitably created by verbal communication. Jean-Louis Barrault also sees gestural expression in theatre as harmonious with the natural pulsations of the body: 'Tout comme le coeur bat l'iambe (systole-diastole), tout comme le souffle respire l'iambe (inspiration, expiration), le geste se rythme sur l'iambe (contraction-détente)'⁴. Expression via the body's 'natural' rhythms and tempos is immediate, unmediated, unrepresented, for

¹ Other examples from *Les Paravents* include the following: In the Second Tableau the tempo begins moderately. Warda and Malika's voices are 'traînante' and 'désenchantée' (pp. 28 and 30). The pace then accelerates dramatically - 'tout cela sera dit très vite' (p. 34). In the Third Tableau Leïla and La Mère speak '*de plus en plus vite, comme pour une libération*' (p. 43). During the scene in which Kadidja incites the Arabs to draw their atrocities on the screens, Genet annotates the text with 'très vite' and 'très rapide' (pp. 156-157). The vengeful 'tricoteuses' speak at an accelerated pace before they stab Warda with their knitting needles. Finally, the concluding tableau to the play is to be performed '*sur un rythme très rapide*' (p. 240).

² See for example Tom F. Driver, *Jean Genet*, p. 41, and Claude Bonnefoy, *Genet*, p. 97.

³ Antonin Artaud, *Dossier du Théâtre et son double, Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) IV, p. 282.

⁴ *Réflexions sur le théâtre*, p. 122.

Barrault. In an interview with J.J. Lebel two members of the Living Theater, Julian Beck and Judith Malina speak of the 'rite de guérison', which echoes Artaud's notion of liberation through the plague, to which I alluded in Chapter Two¹. The Living Theater is noted for the 'Happening' effect that takes place during its productions². Thus, for Artaud and his followers by accelerating the tempo of the body to a level of wild abandon, the actor is able to transcend socially dictated rituals and master 'true' expression.

Artaud's emphasis on the actor's body in theatre has inspired generations of playwrights, directors and actors, the Living Theater, Barrault, Brook and Genet being amongst many. However, Artaud's belief that the body and trance somehow reveal a manner of 'truth' beyond symbolic representation, is confused. In his personal life Artaud wrestled with insanity, and his attempts to crack the carapace of symbolic representation and resist the inevitability of socially constructed discourses at times resulted in psychosis³. More to the point, physical paroxysm and trance through dramatic tempo acceleration have not been staged successfully either by Artaud himself, or by The Living Theater, or for that matter any theatre company⁴. To define tempo in Genet's theatre as trance is therefore spurious on several counts. Firstly, as I have stated throughout this dissertation, transcendence is not an option for Genet's socialised beings. Secondly, from a dramatic perspective trance has not been employed to successful ends, whilst Genet's use of tempo is most effective. Lastly, Genet scorns any kind of abandon on his stage. He positions each phoneme in his

¹ J.J. Lebel, *Entretiens avec le Living Theater*, p. 96.

² A 'Happening' can be described as an illogical state of frenzied trance issuing from liberated physical energies that are attained by increasing tempo dramatically. Trance supposedly releases the subject from the mechanical repetition and inertia of defunct quotidian typification and the oppressiveness of ideologies. Beck describes the Living Theater play *Mysteries* in terms of a trance-like incantatory dance towards atemporal transcendence, an elevation to the truth (P. Biner, *Le Living Theater* (Lausanne: La Cité, 1968), p. 97).

³ See Julia Kristeva: 'Antonin Artaud brûle des intensités sonores de son corps dont les fibres embrasées récusent les facilités du sexe et de l'identité psychique : un refus qui bascule en psychose' (Julia Kristeva, *Sens et non sens de la révolte (discours direct)* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), p. 41).

⁴ In *The Theatre of Revolt* Brustein describes attempts at Artaudian production. They were either too theoretical and hence undramatic, or else gratuitously violent, thus alienating the spectators instead of involving them in the trance. Whilst Brook himself respects much of Artaud's work and embraces the concept of transcendence through theatre, he himself expresses doubts about trance: 'A totem, a cry from the womb: these can crack through walls of prejudice in any man: a howl can certainly reach through to the guts. But is this revealing?' (*The Empty Space*, p. 54). Brook still believes that there is a 'truth' to be revealed beyond our discursive world. But he feels that frenzied tempo leading to trance is not an effective means, for it intimidates, confuses and alienates the spectators, hence achieving precisely the opposite of its aims.

verbal text meticulously, as I illustrated in my previous chapter. He expects his actors to apply the same attention to detail to every aspect of their performance.

Spontaneity is alien to Genet's theatre. Tempo acceleration is the result of meticulous scripting and rehearsal. Genet warns: 'ne permettez pas à un comédien de s'oublier'¹. He requests of his actors total control, total stylisation of each performed gesture. '*LE JEU sera extrêmement précis. Très serré. Pas de gestes inutiles*', he insists². The actor must be the master of timing, of vocal inflection, of gesture and movement and of structured rhythmic patterns, in the same way that Genet is the master of phonemes, morphemes and stresses. Even the stage hands must stylise their every move, so as to constitute a material presence in addition to serving a practical purpose³. Every part of every person's body and voice becomes an individual, singular quintessence of artifice.

Tempo acceleration in Genet's theatre represents the very artifice that Artaud and his disciples seek to reach beyond. It creates similar effects to those produced by alternations between lethargy and activity, immobility and movement, one tone and another. Attention is drawn to the material aspect to the actor's delivery. The difference with instances of alternation lies in the fact that increasing or decreasing the speed with which verbal utterances are delivered inevitably affects the comprehension of actual words pronounced, as I explain.

I have pointed to the manner in which Genet indicates tempo with the use of stage directions. Genet also highlights tempo by underlining the ends and beginnings of characters' lines. The underlined words 'se chevauchent'⁴. This overlapping not only inevitably increases tempo, but is also dramatically efficient, for it concurrently enhances several already existing effects that are created by rhythmic structures, as I show.

Rhythmic structures like the 'rime suffisant' between 'Juive' and 'lessive' uttered by La Mère and Saïd in *Les Paravents* are underscored, because the characters' lines overlap each other. Increased tempo obscures content, for the

¹ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 13.

² Genet's capitals, 'Quelques indications', *Les Paravents*, p. 11.

³ He/she 'doit se savoir un véritable acteur, s'il veut animer le décor', *Les Paravents*, p. 25.

⁴ *Les Paravents* (Paris: Marc Barbezat L'Arbalète, 1961-1976). This edition is identical to the final 1976 version, save Genet's underlinings.

spectator's attention is drawn more to the sound of the simultaneously rhyming uttered words, than to their semantic signification¹. Overlapping dialogues can also enhance Genet's technique of presenting opposites concurrently in order to effect the theatrical state of dual disbelief and suspension of disbelief in the spectator. For example, beautiful and ugly are vocalised together here:

LEÏLA [...] : Quand j'étais belle...
 LA MÈRE Moche. Ne have pas sur ta cagoule.²

The effect is not so much of semantic effacement, as of a detachment of the sign from the referent. Both words are employed simultaneously to represent the same entity. The oscillation between two opposite meanings results in the ultimate referential effacement of both. Genet also highlights self-consciously the artifice inherent in communication. As I illustrated in Chapter Four, authentic exchange gives way to line recital. In this instant, La Mère could not have corrected Leïla without awaiting the end of her line, were the exchange not scripted. Genet thus employs accelerated tempo as yet another device with which to expose communication as ritual and roleplay. In Chapter Four I also discussed the way in which Genet uses interruption to illustrate how real exchange between individuals is impossible. This concept is enhanced when character's lines overlap each other.

Genet thus employs tempo in order to enhance other aspects of artifice on his stage, such as rhythmic structures, or the concept of communication as ceremony. He also enables tempo to represent nothing but its own material presence, its own slowness and speed. The graveyard scene from *Les Paravents* between La Mère and Si Slimane illustrates better than any other, Genet's exploitation of tempo for its material presence. Tempo increases until the dialogue is 'presque incompréhensible', only to slow down to a languid pace by the end (p. 89). At times characters continue to speak, irrespective of other characters' interjections. Take the following example:

MADANI [...] Ah, tu vois... Ce que tu as dit?
 LA MÈRE Il ne te reconnaît pas?
 MADANI *à la mère* : Laisse-moi faire mon travail.³

¹ 1961-1976, Premier tableau, pp. 13-22.

² 1961-1976, Troisième tableau, pp. 35-43.

³ 1961-1976, Huitième tableau, pp. 81-93.

According to Genet's underlinings, the actor playing Madani does not stop to draw breath between lines, and therefore he does he respect protocol by giving La Mère her due speaking time. Because tempo is noticeably increased, it is perceived by the spectator in terms of its materiality, in terms of speed. In parallel, tempo here defines communication as ritual repeating, where real listening and exchange are impossible.

Whereas during more *lento* parts of the scene the underlined words match each other syllable for syllable, they become asymmetrical when tempo peaks. Certain syllables thus pass almost unheard. Genet sometimes underlines more syllables in the interrupting lines than in those interrupted. The effect is for example that Madani's words become in part effaced:

MADANI	[...] Le plus dur c'est que je m'en aille de moi. Lui, il veindra me <u>remplacer</u> .
LA MÈRE	<i>un peu angoissée</i> : <u>Ah?</u> ... Et... si tu t'en vas de toi, tu vas <u>où?</u> ¹

Because La Mère's line begins at Madani's 'rem', the 'placer' becomes unavoidably smothered. The signifier is inevitably foregrounded at the expense of the signified. A heightened sense of alacrity is also inevitable, for one actor does not await the end of another's utterance:

LA MÈRE	<i>avec colère</i> : Tu savais pourtant que je suis pleureuse. Que je suis une des meilleures <u>pleureuses?</u>
LA BOUCHE	<u>Je ne voulais</u> pas de toi à mon enterrement.
LA MÈRE	<i>avec colère</i> : <u>D'où il est</u> , Saïd, sorti de mon ventre ou du tien? [...] ²

La Bouche's 'je ne voulais', measuring four syllables, must be uttered in the same space of time as La Mère's 'pleureuses', measuring two syllables. La Bouche's first words must therefore be uttered at twice the speed of La Mère's. This gives the impression that each time a character speaks the tempo is upped. Through increased tempo and overlapping Genet renders semantic intelligibility nearly impossible.

Only the Arabs' lines contain overlapping: that of La Mère, Saïd and Leïla; Warda and her customers; Si Slimane; Kadidja and her guerrilla protégés; Ommou

¹ 1961-1976, Huitième tableau, pp. 81-93.

² 1961-1976, Huitième tableau, pp. 81-93

and the Arab soldiers (pp. 25, 38, 93, 156 & 203). It is tempting to conclude that tempo acceleration contributes towards sketching an 'Arab' identity distinct from that of the colonials. In one respect the jury must remain forever out on this matter, for Genet never completed his 'underlining' project¹. More significantly however, I believe that neither tempo, nor acting style, nor rhythmic structures, nor roles are the property of any one character. The signifier is non-essential, and is passed indiscriminately from character to character, actor to actor. Tempo becomes another aspect of the actor that the spectator perceives in terms of its material presence, its artifice, and not its part played in inherent identity.

The actor is thus an amalgam of disparate items of clothing and accessories, eclectic movements and gestures, clashing vocal pitches and accents, and fluctuating tempos. But is the spectator able to synthesise all the jigsaw pieces of these grotesque, clownesque figures into a coherent picture? I now discuss the manner in which Genet succeeds in maintaining each fragment of the actor's voice and body as separate, in order further to underscore non-verbal materiality.

(v) Dislocation and Fragmentation of the Actor's Body and Voice

Genet transforms the actor's body into a multitude of disparate signs that fragment the spectator's view of body and voice. Genet is known to have been influenced strongly by Oriental theatre, where each gesture is stylised meticulously in order to underscore its own materiality, and not simply to underpin metaphorical signification or to flesh out characterisation². This influence becomes evident when noticing the disparate segments that constitute the characters.

Peter Brook explains an exercise whereby his actors enter into combat with each other without making physical contact or moving their heads or limbs. Brook intends the limited physical alternatives to transform the actor's torso into a totem of

¹ During a conversation I had with Albert Dichy, it transpired that Genet once told Paule Thévenin he had found this meticulous underlining tedious, and had abandoned it before completion. Whether or not he would have intended the colonialists' words to run into each other is a moot point.

² In his book entitled *Theater East and West: Perspectives Toward a Total Theater*, (California: University of California Press, 1967), Leonard Pronko states that Genet told him of the impact the Peking Opera's 1955 visit to Paris had on him. In addition, in his correspondences with Hubert Fichte Genet writes of his admiration for a Noh star he saw in Japan. A comparison between Genet's theatre and Japanese Noh is useful because of the emphasis on gesture in Noh. And yet it could be misleading because of the implicit religious connotations of every sign in Noh. See Denis Gontard, who explains the dramaturgy of Noh theatre in *Nô Kyôgen* (Paris: Hitzeroth, 1987), p. 10.

true expression around which all other movement is centred¹. Ferrand, the French executioner in *Le Bagne* refers to the number of guillotined men in terms of decapitated heads, not whole bodies: 'j'aime mieux compter les têtes. Cent vingt-sept têtes d'un côté, de l'autre côté, cent vingt-sept troncs' (p. 28). Contrary to Brook's conception, the actor's body on Genet's stage is not one holistic, physical unity. It is fissured into a multitude of clashing artificially quintessential signs. Gesture with the hands and arms, movement of the legs, tone of the voice and tempo all march to different drummers.

In his *Lettres à Roger Blin*, Genet writes:

Quand la voix a trouvé ses vraies modulations, découvrir les gestes qui viendront alors la souligner, gestes qui ne seront plus familièrement accordés à la voix, mais qui peut-être s'opposeront à elle - par exemple, à une inflexion désolée un geste de la main et du pied très allègre - de façon que le tout forme une longue suite d'accords non convenus - brisés [...] (p. 68).

Genet's actors combine gestures with words that, according to convention, appear mismatched. For example, an intonation of lamentation accompanies a cheerful twist of the hand, as Genet requests here, or a matter-of-fact tone is used to recite a poetic text, as I stated in my section on tone. The spectator hence perceives the actor's body and voice fragmentarily. According to Charles Bally's *Traité de stylistique française I*, physical gestures compensate for insufficiencies in speech, for example indicating 'which', in the event of confusion (p. 92). Genet refuses this mimetism. Gesture, movement, tone, tempo and dialogue are all dislocated into disparate fragments. In 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt' Genet writes: 'ainsi chaque personne ne m'apparaissait plus dans sa totale, dans son absolue, dans sa magnifique individualité' (p. 30). In his theatre the audience perceives separately the actor's pitch, tempo, gestures and walk, because they are all discordant. Neither the character, nor the actor playing that character constitute integral subjects.

Genet sometime takes this metaphorical dismembering a step further. In *Les Nègres* for example Diouf plays the white girl Marie, whereas her voice is uttered by Village. Similarly in *Les Paravents* Madani poses as Si Slimane's 'Bouche'. Voice and body are dislocated. The acts of looking and of mentally registering what is seen are also dislocated from each other at times. In *Les Paravents* the Gendarme enters

¹ *The Empty Space*, p. 50.

the stage on one side, whereas Leïla looks the other way (p. 98). Later, '*les morts regarderont en haut, alors que la scène qu'ils regardent se joue en bas*' (p. 215)¹. And walking is disassociated from spatial advancement when in *Le Bagne* the convicts walk on the spot in unison: '*Afin de donner l'impression de défiler devant les lits, le groupe marche sur place, sans avancer, imitant la marche*' (p. 80). These examples are overt instances of the actor being guillotined into individually discernible segments, like Ferrand's prisoners in *Le Bagne*. However, all Genet's actors at each instant become fractured into a separate voice, a walk, a hand gesture... They are no longer one integral whole. The actor is presented to the spectator as a loosely connected collection of random pieces. In a study of objects and space in Genet's theatre, Y. Went-Douest speaks of the hidden truths that are revealed when incongruous words and gestures are juxtaposed: 'le geste qui va à l'encontre de la parole traduite, indépendamment de celle-ci, des zones oubliées et uniques de la conscience.'² I disagree with this Surrealist interpretation of seemingly incompatible gestures, tempos and tones. These aspects of the actor's performance all resist integration into a coherent whole. They do not combine together to draw a fuller picture of the human. On his stage the disparate fragments of the actor's body represent their own material presence, in the present, and in turn demonstrate the absence of any meaning that might transcend codification.

I have stressed that the actor's body and voice are perceived as individual, unrelated sections. This is not to say that the entire performance shudders in a staccato manner from movement to movement. When defining the grotesque and the clownesque, I stressed that the notion of clumsiness concerns heterogeneity rather than one single 'gauche' style. The importance is to convey overt artifice, which can be achieved in many different ways. I now allude to Genet's use of a form of cohesive, and not clashing movement, namely orchestrated action, and discuss how he underscores materiality here not through fragmentation, but through unification.

¹ Genet's italics.

² Y. Went-Douest, *Le Symbolisme des objets et l'espace mythique dans le théâtre de Jean Genet* (Drukkerij de Kemenaer-Oedstgeest, 1980), p. 140.

(vi) Orchestrated movement

(a) Refusal of Metaphor

Orchestrated movement manifests itself on numerous occasions throughout Genet's theatre. Like tempo acceleration, this activity could appear to show shades of an Artaudian attempt at accessing a primal state by sharing communal energies. I dismiss rapidly this interpretation of orchestrated performance in Genet's works. This leads me to conclude that orchestrated movement underscores the material dimension of the actor's body as much as fragmented, disparate gestures do, despite the fact that it might appear to produce cohesion and not fragmentation.

The following examples serve to show quite how widespread orchestrated movement in Genet's theatre is. I identify instances of this device, and then indicate their significance. In *Les Nègres*, *Les Paravents* and *Le Bagne* Genet prescribes an extensive use of synchronised movement by his actors. In *Les Nègres* the White Court and the Blacks execute gestures in unison when the ill fate of the white girl Marie is recounted: '*Toute la Cour essuie une larme d'un geste théâtral très visible, et pousse un long sanglot de douleur auquel répond le rire très aigu et parfaitement orchestré des Nègres*' (p. 28). Later, '*toute la Cour se frotte les mains*', in reaction to a share price report (p. 32). And to expel the smell of the rotting old woman inside the catafalque the Blacks '*sortent une cigarette de leur poche, se donnent du feu en se saluant, cérémonieusement, puis se mettent en cercle en envoyant la fumée autour du catafalque. Ils bourdonnent, bouche fermée, une mélopée*' (p. 35). Finally, when Village enters Marie's bedroom to murder her, the Blacks clap their hands, stamp their feet and recite their lines gently in time (p. 79). In *Les Paravents* the Arab women who refuse La Mère permission to mourn the death of Si Slimane perform their moves in unison: '*Les trois femmes font avec la tête le signe non*', and shortly afterwards '*les deux femmes semblent prêter l'oreille, puis elles font avec la tête et les mains le signe non*' (p. 67). Finally, in *Le Bagne* the three directors of the penal colony '*soudain, d'un seul mouvement [...] tournent la tête*' (p. 64). Several important points emerge from Genet's use of orchestrated movement. I have already stressed that each and every gesture made and word uttered on stage is the result of rigorous rehearsal. This emphasis on formalisation is inevitably highlighted when all actors perform identical moves. Synchronised gesture is not aimed at a communal release of

Artaudian physical energies. The unification serves further to underscore the pre-eminence of material form, and not to transcend this form. In *Lettres à Roger Blin* Genet writes:

Le tremblement des Arabes devant le fils de Sir Harold : [...] Chaque acteur doit s'entraîner à faire trembler tous ses membres de façon qu'eux tous donnent une vision douloureuse de la frousse. Ils trembleront de la tête aux pieds, des épaules aux mains, et le tremblement doit aller jusqu'à la transe (p. 59).

Genet's orchestrated movement is not a Living Theater 'Happening' or an Artaudian trance, even though Genet here employs the word 'trance'. In his 'Commentaires du douzième tableau' Genet writes: 'si l'on monte cette pièce, il est indispensable de créer une école du tremblement.'¹ Orchestrated movement comprises totally controlled, meticulously timed actions that are learnt, rehearsed, and mastered. In *Les Nègres* the programmed, ritualised character of orchestrated movement is visually underscored by Archibald posing as a conductor².

The second point is the following: the orchestrated movement of Genet's actors is not a metaphorical embodiment of any one thematic or semantic element in the text. In his instructions to Blin, Genet writes: 'évoquer en passant un champ de seigle par grand vent ou la fuite d'une compagnie de perdrix.'³ The trembling Arabs can evoke a field of rye *or* a flock of partridges. It is inconsequential which image they convey, because the material dimension to the trembling is of more significance than what the trembling signifies. For this reason I do not treat these instances of orchestrated movement individually. The fact that the gestures or words are performed simultaneously by several actors is more important than the gestures or words themselves. Nor is orchestration related to specific characters. Blacks, Whites, Arabs and colonials alike all execute meticulously structured, synchronised gestures. The refusal of metaphor means that synchronised movement represents its own materiality. Opacity affords weight to the signifier. Resistance to metaphor is in itself metaphorical, for it enhances the perception of form over the significance of content. Orchestrated movement is therefore a *Verfremdungseffekt* that exposes the catatonic ritualisation of all movement. Genet thus exposes artifice via both a heterogeneous

¹ *Les Paravents*, 'Commentaires du douzième tableau', p. 163.

² Suggested in 'Pour jouer *Les Nègres*', p. 9.

³ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 59.

amalgam of clashing gestures and tones, and via the unification of all gestures and tones on stage into one single block of orchestrated artifice.

Whilst gesture and movement in Genet's theatre to my mind do not carry metaphorical signification, I feel that there is one exception to this general axiom, namely dance. There is an exception to every rule in Genet's poetic of artifice, because ultimately there are no rules. Dance features very heavily in Genet's oeuvre, and its implications require discussion, for they contribute towards the concept of the non-verbal as codification.

(b) The Exception: Dance as Metaphor

For the most part Genet scrambles the actor's gestures and movements into a hybrid concoction of heterogeneous elements that represent their own materiality instead of becoming immediately interpretable as metaphor. However, the symbolic significance of dance, a motif that prevails across Genet's theatrical oeuvre, cannot be overlooked.

From *Haute surveillance* to *Les Paravents*, Genet's characters dance. In *Splendid's* the Policeman and Bravo enter the stage dancing, and the radio plays a waltz to which Bob and Bravo sway (pp. 25 & 30). In addition, the first act ends with the characters dancing to a '*marche nuptiale*' on the radio (p. 79). In *Le Bagne* the convict Roger dances a waltz under the penal colony walls (p. 54). *Les Nègres* begins and ends with the Blacks dancing to a minuet by Mozart, and the Blacks all dance as a tribute to Diouf when he becomes Marie (p. 70). Bobo's contribution is a '*danse obscène*' (p. 66). In *Les Paravents* La Mère dances on her high heels on the way to her son's wedding, and later Madani and La Mère dance on Si Slimane's grave. Dance, as opposed to other kinds of movement on Genet's stage, symbolises in excess of its own materiality. In *Haute surveillance* Yeux-Verts explains how he attempted to escape his destiny as a murderer in order to forge his own identity, by dancing: 'Il fallait voir ma danse! J'ai dansé, les gars, j'ai dansé! (*Ici l'acteur devra inventer une sorte de danse très brève, burlesque si possible et émouvante [...]*)' (p. 63). It appears here that dance is posited as a failed attempt at more 'authentic' movement, freed from discursive dictate. Similarly, when Roger in *Le Bagne* waltzes under the walls of the penal colony, he hopes that his liberated movements might cause the walls to tumble down so that he can gain freedom: 'Peut-être que ma

chaloupée les fera bouger... [...] (*il commence un mouvement de valse*) (p. 54). And when the gangsters in *Splendid's* dance, they seek to free themselves from the stereotype of 'tough criminals' that the press and media have imposed upon them.

But dance can also evoke the exact opposite of liberation, namely conformity. As a result of a piece of inspiration by Roger Blin, *Les Nègres* begins and ends with the same minuet by Mozart. The play ends with all the actors dancing onto the stage to an African beat, that then gives way to the minuet. The minuet is to my mind an emblematic indication of the discursive 'champ clos' within which the Blacks exist. They fail to forge their own authentic black identity, instead surrendering to the convention, etiquette and conformity of colonialism. In *Haute surveillance*, *Le Bagne* and *Splendid's* dance therefore appears to symbolise an attempt at freedom of expression, and in *Les Nègres* it signifies the inevitable failure of this attempt. All movement derives from codification. In one respect Genet thus affords metaphorical signification to dance. In another, he makes dance symbolise one notion and its opposite, thus avoiding the closure of one transcendental signification, as dance represents a plurality of notions from one play to the next. Genet's refusal of metaphor is proven not to be tyrannical. Nothing is banished from his theatre of inclusion, not least metaphor. But what is evident is that for the main part Genet resists coherence and favours a fragmentation into micro-moments of poetry.

In the case of orchestrated movement the actor's body can represent a field of rye or a flock of partridges. Equally, dance can signify conformity or liberation. Genet exercises total freedom to reconfigure signs. No aspect of his theatre exhibits this flexibility more flagrantly than Genet's reconfiguration of the actor's body and voice, as I illustrate.

(vii) Reconfiguration of the Actor and Mobility

Genet bears witness to the non-essentialism of the body's signification in order to examine in terms of a cultural process the layering of shifting images that composes the actor's body. The style of acting - movement, gesture, tone and tempo - illustrates bodily morphology as a fictionally invested projection, a superficial illusion. The actors 'doivent essayer de rentrer en eux-mêmes, d'être "absents à la salle" comme on

est absent au monde.’¹ This request reflects the notion that our bodies are a clean page upon which society scribbles its random graffitis. Likewise, actors in Genet’s theatre are a blank outer surface upon which the text and director inscribe their images. The body is not centred around the essentialist, centripetal force of Artaudian sexual or individual energy. It is made up of image, and can be represented by any fiction. Genet presents this concept overtly by changing the actor’s identity repeatedly. Chapter Four examines the constant shifting from role to role that Genet exercises on his characters. Here, I investigate his reconfiguration of the actor him or herself, as opposed to reconfiguration of the role the character plays. The actor on Genet’s stage displays a versatility of vocal and gestural movement that celebrates liberation from the illusion of inherent identity. In turn, the layers of image added to the actor’s body and voice afford the theatricality of multiple presence, transubstantiating the actor’s body into incantation. In my last chapter I defined incantation as language that both carries semantic content and reveals its own material dimension. In this chapter I show how the voices and movements of Genet’s actors also become incantation, as an actor simultaneously reveals him/herself as a dog, a tree or a cannon, and as an actor.

In *Les Paravents* ‘chaque acteur sera tenu de jouer le rôle de cinq ou six personnages, hommes ou femmes.’² The actor’s body and voice can be reconfigured in order to represent a multiplicity of different characters. Genet’s directors exercise the same disregard for the actors’ inherent gender and age as Genet does. In the 1985 production of *Haute surveillance* the three prisoners are played by women; in two productions of *Les Bonnes* the two maids and Madame are played by men; in Blin’s *Les Nègres* the ageing white Queen and the old man Diouf are played by young black actors³. Like the phoneme, like the morpheme, like the role, the actor’s body is a material signifier that can be wilfully transformed. Both the actor’s and the character’s gender are as open for redefinition as everything else on Genet’s stage.

The most flagrant examples of reconfiguring the actor’s body to theatrical effect manifest themselves when Genet transforms actors into animals. Instances are

¹ *Les Paravents*, pp. 104-105.

² ‘Personnages’, p. 15.

³ *Haute surveillance*, Compagnie Robert Cordier, Théâtre Marie-Stuart, 1985; *Les Bonnes* at the ‘Jardin’ de la Cité universitaire, Paris, April 1971, and Marcel Delval’s 1979 production; Jean Genet, *Les Nègres*, with photographs by Ernest Scheidegger, of Blin’s production.

multiple: Genet adds to the 1976 version of *Les Bonnes* the instruction that Claire's words must be '*presque dans un aboiement*' when she and her sister argue (p. 41). The movements and sounds of dogs prevail throughout Genet's theatre. In *Le Balcon* the Judge calls the Hangman 'Cerbère', the three-headed dog that guards Hades. The hangman bares his teeth and answers with a bark - 'Houah, houah!' (p. 36). Genet adds to the revised version of the play the instruction that the Judge's own utterances must turn into a bark when he tries to extract the truth from the thief: 'Où? Où? Où? Où? Hou! Hou! Hou!...' (p. 37). In *Les Paravents* all the women must act like 'des bêtes', and Leïla and La Mère appear frequently on stage in the form of a pack of wild dogs¹. Horses and cattle are also a recurrent motif. In the Third Tableau of *Le Balcon* the prostitute brays, whinnies and rears as she plays the General's horse. In *Les Nègres* Archibald ends his initiation speech by making the sounds and gestures of a horse: '*Il frappe du pied avec une rage excessive, presque comme un cheval, et il hennit comme un cheval*' (p. 26). At the end of the ceremony when the Blacks kill the members of the White Court one by one, the Missionary begins to moo, walks on all fours, grazes, licks the feet of the Blacks and is then sent to the slaughterhouse (p. 118). The Arab women in *Les Paravents* are heard off-stage stampeding and mooing like cattle (p. 69)... A comment in *Haute surveillance* perhaps provides an insight into Genet's use of animal noise and mime. Yeux-Verts explains how he tried in vain to reverse the acts that had lead him to murder:

J'ai voulu revenir en arrière, Halte! Impossible! J'ai fait des efforts. Je courrais à droite et à gauche. Je me tortillais. J'essayais toutes les formes pour ne pas devenir un assassin. Essayé d'être un chien, chat, un cheval, un tigre, une table, une pierre! (p. 62).

The choice of animal appears to be arbitrary. For this reason I feel that any attempt to find an individual signification for each animal is spurious. Genet establishes a paradox, in that even though the motifs of the dog and horse are salient in his works, they do not form a paradigm of symbolic signification. However, this is not to say that they are devoid of signification altogether. Whilst the actual animals are not of metaphorical import, the act of transforming the body from animal to animal is². To

¹ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 15.

² Whilst my argument leads me not to attribute immutable meanings to each of Genet's symbols, I nonetheless feel he accords the spectator the liberty to make these interpretations, should he/she so wish.

my mind, metamorphosis into another animal represents a freedom for reconfiguration. This flagrant non-essence could potentially provoke an identity crisis in the individual. Instead, Genet illustrates the way in which the individual turns the absence of transcendental identity to his/her own end, by striving towards creativity.

Genet puts the dramatic potential of metamorphosing the actor to efficient, practical use as well as creative use. He employs the actor's voice in order to multiply fictional locations on stage. By imitating the sounds of toads, owls, a distant lion's roar, rustling leaves and snapping twigs underfoot, the Blacks most masterfully conjure up the perilous 'heart of darkness' that the White Court traverses (p. 95). And Leïla and La Mère in *Les Paravents* evoke a farmyard by imitating chickens, pigeons and a cockerel. From a pragmatic standpoint, Genet reduces the number of actors and special effects required by production. More significantly for my study, with his every move, he celebrates the non-essence of identity, turning the actor into an existential acrobat that somersaults in and out of identities.

From a polyphonic perspective, the actor is fissured into the physical utterer of an animal or inanimate sound, and what the sound represents. The actor's voice and body constitute incantation. The people on stage are fragmented into both actor and animal. The actor's voice is not that of a cow or chicken. It *represents* the cow or the chicken and simultaneously represents itself, its own falsity, for it is but the utterance of an actor, and this is glaringly obvious to the spectator. Because both layers are simultaneously present, the theatrical effect of belief and disbelief is produced. This transvestism is most theatrical from the perspective of the spectator, as I demonstrate.

(viii) Transvestism, Transubstantiation and Theatricality

Transvestism, transubstantiation and theatricality are three terms that are applicable to all aspects of Genet's theatre. They are particularly useful when attempting to understand precisely why Genet insists metaphorically that his actors carry the mask under their arm instead of covering their face with it. The actor must constitute '*un signe chargé de signes*'¹. For reasons of theatricality, the disparate gestures, tones and

¹ Genet's italics, *Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert*, p. 12.

items of clothing are left to affirm their own individuality instead of being subsumed into integral characters, as I explain.

The Blacks invalidate the forest they themselves animate, with their trademark orchestrated laugh, and Leïla and La Mère's farmyard noises are 'soulignés par des rires aussi importants qu'eux'.¹ The laughter reminds the spectator constantly that he/she witnesses a character representing a farmyard, and not just a farmyard *per se*. Here again Genet's humorous game carries a solemn message. The laughter denounces action as mere artifice, and this artifice subtends all social existence. The actors simultaneously solicit and prevent the spectator's belief. Transvestism is a salient paradigm throughout Genet's oeuvre, and can be defined as the co-presence of the conceptions of male and female². It is thus theatrical according to Genet's definition of the word, for it solicits the simultaneous states of belief and disbelief. The transvestite both conceals his masculinity and draws attention to it, through the performative act of concealment. This dynamic generates a kind of 'thrill' that Genet wishes to excite in the spectator. In his *Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert* Genet writes '*l'acteur occidental [...] veut s'identifier à un personnage de drame ou de comédie* (p. 12)³. Any attempt to 'become' the hero, the king or the lover on stage is not only 'l'exhibitionnisme' according to Genet, but it is also devoid of dramatic effect⁴. Genet condemns an acting style that requires the performer to embody that character, animal or place. Instead, the actor must both present the spectator with the character, animal or place, and present them with him/herself as a performer. Genet thus accords his spectator the theatrical excitement of believing in the proceedings on stage, and suspending that belief, due to the evident falsity of for example a woman playing a chicken. The black male Diouf does not substitute himself for the white female Marie in *Les Nègres*; the maid does not substitute herself for Madame in *Les Bonnes*; the judge does not substitute himself for the dog in *Le Balcon*. The audience is at once made to believe that Diouf is a white virgin, and is denied belief, by the overt falseness of the guise. The audience at once believes that Diouf is an old man, and is

¹ 'Commentaires du troisième tableau', *Les Paravents*, p. 46.

² One of his first plays, *Hélioglobale*, for instance, is named after a Roman emperor whose absence from the public eye is broken only by rare appearances in women's clothing.

³ Genet's italics.

⁴ *Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert*, p. 12.

denied belief because the actor is young and agile. The actors and characters are transubstantiated to enable a simultaneous presence of multiple images.

Examples of Genet's intention to keep the actor distinct from the part played prevail throughout his theatre: The masks Genet prescribes for the White Court in *Les Nègres* must expose a border of the black actor's hair around the sides¹. When Diouf plays Marie, his costume comprises nothing but a pair of white gloves and a crudely painted mask of a white face with rosy cheeks, behind which the black actor's face is visible. Peter Brook explains a mask-wearing technique inspired by Balinese theatre that he uses with his actors : 'We take the mask, and for a long time we look at it, until we feel the face so strongly that we can begin to breathe with it.'² For Brook this exercise prevents the mask from being frozen by the pre-established connotations it might carry, for it will be mobilised by the actor's energies. But in Genet's theatre the mask represents the very fixity of social stereotype that Brook seeks to mobilise. Mobility for Genet derives not from the capacity to animate the mask, but from the capacity to shift from mask to mask, as I explained with reference to the clashing concoctions of costumes, gestures and tones sported by any one character earlier in this chapter, and with reference to role swapping in Chapter Four.

Brook's conception of the mask is a misconception as far as Genet's theatre is concerned. Another misconception regarding the use of masks surrounds the supposed juxtaposition of falsity with reality. His mask does not constitute a contrast with the face. Both layers are artifice, the former constructed by the playwright, director and designer, and the latter by society's diverse influences. Similarly, the alternation between different styles of gesture and different tones and tempos constitutes the shifting from one artificially constructed poetic system to the next. When the Blacks interrupt their evocation of a rain forest scene with laughter, it '*n'est pas un rire en liberté*' (p. 10). It is just as formalised and meticulously rehearsed as the sounds of frogs and bats. Each and every sound or movement on Genet's stage becomes intricately codified.

In this section on performance via the actor's body and voice, I have demonstrated the manner in which both actor and character are fissured into plural,

¹ 'Les Personnages' p. 20. This type of mask is characteristic of Noh (See Gontard, *Nô Kyôgen*, p. 8.).

² *There are No Secrets*, p. 49.

disparate images. The tone and pitch of voice, the gestures and movements, the costumes worn, the roles played, all refuse to enter into dialogue with each other. The effect, as I have described, is to provide comment on the multiplicity of influences that shape the socialised being. The fracturing of body and voice prevents the advancement of action or drama. Instead, Genet's spectacles are splintered into a sequence of isolated dramatic moments. I draw together my broader points on acting style, and conclude this section by illustrate this dynamic of disparity.

(ix) Dramatic Effect versus Drama

In Genet's theatre movement in space is no longer movement in time. The continuity of plot and character paradigms give way to contiguity between single fleeting moments of aestheticism. Dramatic effect replaces drama. In 'Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*' Genet writes: 'les actrices retiendront donc leurs gestes, chacun étant comme suspendu, ou cassé' (p. 7). In my last chapter I described Genet's rhythmic structures as ornaments or sequins. They fracture diegesis by representing themselves at the same time as supporting the signified. Characters have no clear definition, and yet every one of the actor's gestures and movements is as dense and defined as the fine detail of a Rembrandt or Giacometti painting. In his letters to Blin, Genet states that each scene from each tableau in *Les Paravents* must dazzle like a solitaire:

Chacune des scènes de chacun des tableaux doit être mise au point et jouée avec la rigueur d'une petite pièce, qui serait une totalité. Sans bavure. Et sans que rien laisse penser qu'une autre scène, ou qu'un autre tableau doivent suivre ceux qu'on vient de jouer (p. 30).

Genet's desire to fracture his plays, in particular *Les Paravents*, into a multitude of unique moments is clear. The Greek etymological derivation of 'drama' is action. As I stated in Chapter Four, the self-conscious performativity of events and words on Genet's stage foregrounds repetition and adherence to type over and above any genuine action that might advance plot. When *Les Paravents* begins, each tableau is a singular event. As it progresses, each tableau is fragmented into a series of singular events¹. I should like to extend Genet's comments on unique fleeting moments in *Les*

¹ In the revised version of *Les Paravents* the original Fourteenth and Fifteenth Tableaux are merged into one extremely disjointed tableau. This modification is effective because fragmentation is incorporated into the tableau as well as occurring between tableaux.

Paravents, in order to state that not just each scene, but in fact each step, each gesture with the hand and each inflection of the voice radiates its own splendour and affirms its own atemporal totality, in every one of his plays. Coherence of drama, plot and character are forsaken. This is what must lead Jacques Derrida to write: 'les enchaînements sont invisibles, tout paraît improvisé ou juxtaposé'¹. The play becomes a crowd of individual moving sculptures, in turn enhancing the concept that Genet's acting style is a heterogeneous stumbling, and indicating the disparate influences from which our lives derive.

According to Una Chauhuri, 'the intoxication of endless meaning-production far exceeds any disappointment we might feel at the lack of final meaning-production'². She feels that the beauty of Genet's isolated theatrical moments outweighs his inability to cast a coherent philosophical view. But I feel that Genet achieves both immediate, and final meaning-production. Each individual gesture or movement constitutes a *Verfremdungseffekt* through the very same material opacity that critics such as Chauhuri might criticise as liberal avant-garde formalism. Genet exposes the actor's body as a non-essentialist socially projected image, and movement as codified praxis. The rich blood and gluttonous life of the carnal world only attain corporeality through symbolisation. At the same time he celebrates the potential for reconfiguration of the actor's body and voice by adding to it layers of meaning. Each gesture by the body, each inflection by the voice, each grotesque, clownesque, clashing movement represents its own materiality before being answerable to metaphorical signification. Genet indeed leaves the spectator with a world view. Movement is prismatic. It refuses the globalisation of one overriding force. Genet wishes his theatre to be 'un acte à partir duquel le public réagit, comme il veut, comme il peut.'³ Genet does not flatter the audience's lethargy with unifying paradigms. Each gesture, each step shines as brightly as the next. Each one catches the light in a singular way, so that the closure of one transcendental signification is eluded. No spectator is excluded, as the heterogeneity and disparity of the poetic signs allows for the spectator's imagination.

¹ *Glas II*, pp. 82-84.

² Una Chauhuri, *No Man's Stage: A Semiotic Study of Jean Genet's Major Plays* (Michigan: U.M.I. Research Press, 1986), p. 41.

³ 'Avertissement', *Le Balcon*, p. 16.

The style of acting and the role of the actor are central to any discussion of performance and production in Genet's theatre. So too is an analysis of set, the theory of which I attempt to elaborate in such a way as to complement the concept of the actor's body as an anonymity that awaits animation through Genet's dramatic inscription. I now discuss in detail the manner in which Genet conveys his notion of codification through scenic space.

II. The Codification of Space

Genet bestows validity upon every square inch of the stage and auditorium, by cramming it literally full of forms that he erects. Beyond the presence of material forms, Genet tells us that there lies no meaning, nothing. I discuss how Genet overtly criss-crosses the stage with his spatial signs, illustrating the process of meaning production. His performative act of codifying space affirms the weight of his poetic creations and endorses the fundamental part played by codes in our lives.

Jacques Copeau, one of the French Nouveau Théâtre's pioneer directors, fears that excessive decor fetters the spectator's imagination. According to Copeau, scenery furnishes the mind of the spectator, whereas a naked area both frees the imagination, and allows total concentration upon the dramatic energy of the actor's spatial and textual poetry. Certain directors have placed Genet's plays on empty stages. The set of Patrice Chéreau's *Les Paravents* is marked by its hieratic minimalism. My analysis of the central importance of covering every wall, corner and floor on Genet's stage serves to show that Chéreau's decision was perhaps mistaken.

Throughout this dissertation I attempt not to discriminate between Genet's plays. I treat them neither chronologically, nor hierarchically according to the frequency with which polyphonic shifting or rhythmic structuring occurs, the reason being that from the point of view of these two characteristics, no one play is any more or less valid than the next. As regards scenography however, no play in Genet's dramaturgy is as accomplished as *Les Paravents*. The themes and problems of his

earlier plays are transformed into their visual equivalents¹. Whereas in *Le Balcon* for example characters analyse openly the mechanics of representation, in *Les Paravents* these mechanics are conveyed visually, by gradually constructing the set before the spectator's eyes. I have indicated the way in which Genet exposes the process of identity production by decking his characters in a profusion of accoutrements, without which they do not exist. In Genet's most complex and intricate plays, *Les Paravents* and *Les Nègres*, this metaphor for identity construction is extended to all parts of the production, including the stage, which is gradually dressed in more and more accessories. In this chapter I thus analyse set and colour in Genet's theatre in terms of an evolution. I explore how Genet uses raised levels, sections and colours to add layer upon layer of illusion to his stage.

(i) Proliferation of Walls and Occupation of Floor Space: Haute surveillance, Les Bonnes, Splendid's, Elle and Le Balcon

From the point of view of scenography, there are certain discernible developments in Genet's theatre. His stage becomes more and more cluttered with signs. He attempts overtly to conceal the metaphorical *vide* with his poetic forms, his *féerie*. The fact that Genet fills his stage to such an extent highlights the success of his meaning production, and simultaneously underscores the claustrophobic inevitability of all discursive form, for both actor and spectator are completely surrounded. 'Il induit [...] la nécessité continue et analogique, enseignante, étouffante, d'une rhétorique discursive', writes Derrida². I describe Genet's frantic codification of space and clear desire to underscore the vital part played by discursive form.

The set of *Haute surveillance* consists of walls covered in intricate brickwork that '*doit faire supposer à la prison une architecture très compliquée*' (p. 11). The outer walls of the stage thus form part of the spectacle. The floor space also becomes significant. Yeux-Verts marks the ground with his paces, which are to cover the length and breadth of the stage. In *Les Bonnes*, the floor space and outer walls of

¹ By comparing the two versions of *Les Paravents*, one can appreciate Genet's distinct development in favour of the visual in theatre. When Sir Harold hangs his 'gant de pécar' up above the labourers in the old version of the play for example, he says 'je vais laisser quelque chose de moi pour vous surveiller' (1961, Quatrième tableau, pp. 37-43). But in the new version his intention is suggested implicitly through gesture alone, as opposed to word.

² *Glas II*, pp. 82-84.

the scenic space are similarly filled. In ways that echo *Haute surveillance*, the three actors do not leave an inch of the stage uncovered. In *Les Bonnes* Genet wishes the three actors' paces to be systematic and methodical, like the movement of a bee that checks every stamen for pollen¹. With these two plays, Genet hence draws the spectator's attention to the sides walls of the stage, and to its floor space. These parts of the scenic space become codified: they are significant components of the theatrical creation. As I show presently, Genet's formalisation of scenic space increases until not just the walls and floor, but all three dimensions are filled with his poetic forms.

Even in the plays in which set is not so prominent, the space between the walls is crammed with props. Genet seeks to cover every inch of his stage with his poetic forms. Many props within the complex sets he elaborates are themselves employed as concealing devices that disguise both stage and character. The most notable of these props are curtains and balconies, which are perhaps metaphors for masquerade, but more significantly, contribute physically towards masquerade. In *Les Bonnes* the fixtures and fittings of Madame's apartment serve as elements of disguise. The windows are draped in long curtains in which the maids wrap themselves, pretending to parade in Madame's evening gowns (p. 39). In one production of the play Madame's curtains are identical to the red curtain that separates stage from auditorium². The maids' gestures are thus linked candidly to conventional theatrical performance. Genet himself requests the installation of black velvet theatre curtains for any production of *Les Nègres*. The curtains can be linked to black identity, which itself can be drawn back and forth as effortlessly as the curtains, revealing the non-essentialism of all signification. Curtains are therefore a supplementary layer of artifice within Genet's sets. Like curtains, balconies are an additional layer. And like curtains, they are a literal mask within the mask of the set, as well as posing as a metaphor for masquerade. The balcony, prevalent in Genet's works, represents the mask of a building, the external façade perceived by the public. The sets of *Les Bonnes*, *Splendid's* and *Le Balcon* all possess balconies, onto which characters walk

¹ Footnote, p. 35. The details concerning the geometry of the actors' movements is absent in the earlier 1947 and 1958 versions of the play.

² Marcel Delval's production of *Les Bonnes*, 1979.

in order to have their identities endorsed by the public¹. Curtains and balconies are thus both a literal and a metaphorical disguise that Genet adds to the set.

In *Haute surveillance* and *Les Bonnes* Genet inscribes the outer walls and the floor of his stage with signs. In *Le Balcon* Genet begins to create more intricate sets. The outer set that represents the brothel contains a supplementary set that represents Irma's salons. During each of the first three tableaux the spectator perceives the same chandelier and mirror on the right-hand wall of the stage. The reflection in the mirror, of an unmade bed in Irma's room, does not change from one tableau to the next (p. 19)². The room the spectator perceives in each tableau must therefore be identical. What changes is the room within the room. This is achieved by erecting free-standing screens upon which the sacristy, the executioner's chamber and the battlefield are painted in *trompe l'oeil*. Screens thus slide back and forth in the same way as characters slip in and out of roles. The whole stage is a paradoxical illustration of the fixity of masks and the mobility of their constant shifting and of the signifier/signified relationship. But more significantly, it is evident that Genet's sets are beginning to encroach on and codify the empty space in the centre of the stage.

(ii) Vertical, Horizontal and Diagonal Colonisation of Space: *Le Balcon*, *Le Bagne*, *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents*

With *Le Balcon*, Genet propagates the illusory walls on his stage using free-standing screens and sets-within-sets. His layering of walls in front of walls illustrates how he encroaches gradually on the scenic space, filling it more and more with his poetic signs. This colonisation of the stage is most apparent in *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents*, where he invades space vertically and diagonally as well as horizontally.

In *Le Balcon* the performance ends at the entrance to the Chief of Police's mausoleum, a colossal structure that is '*quelque chose comme l'intérieur d'une tour - ou d'un puits*' (p. 140). Genet expands his scenic forms both vertically and horizontally, for the tower or well is like a Russian doll containing other towers or

¹ In *Splendid's* Jean appears on the balcony dressed as Sir Crafford's daughter, and in *Les Bonnes* the sisters walk out onto the balcony dressed as Madame. In *Elle* the Photographer mentions that he once saw the Pope on the 'balcon de Saint-Pierre' (p. 47).

² P. 54: '*La Chambre d'Irma. Très élégante. C'est la chambre même qu'on voyait reflétée dans les miroirs aux trois premiers tableaux*' (Genet's italics).

walls. With *Le Balcon* Genet begins truly to colonise vertical and horizontal scenic space.

Any decision to produce Genet's plays on a minimalist stage is in my opinion a mistake, for Genet appears to display an urgent longing to structure every cubic inch of his stage into form. I highlight the reason for this presently. Many directors are aware of Genet's desire self-consciously to codify space. Although according to its stage directions *Les Bonnes* takes place on a single level, one production is staged inside a chapel consisting of four levels, which bisect vertical space¹. In a production of *Splendid's* the stage is criss-crossed by 'des estrades' that 'se taillent un chemin entre un amas d'objets'². Directors clearly sense that Genet wishes to transubstantiate the entire stage area into theatrical signs. Photographs of Blin's production of *Les Nègres* display platforms at varying levels supported by scaffolding³. Action takes place simultaneously on the different levels. When Vertu substitutes herself for the white Queen for example, she stands on a platform directly above her, illustrating the way overt population of space takes place in all directions⁴. So, not only Genet, but also his directors draw lines across the scenic space.

Several directors contain the set within a confined space. The entire surface area within this limited place consequently becomes structured metonymically into form. In other words, if the play takes place within a huge cage, then all the space within the cage metonymically represents part of the cage⁵. Consequently, no corner of this space is left uninscribed, uncoded. In one production of *Les Bonnes* the performance takes place inside a box, and in a production of *Elle* the play is staged inside a giant camera⁶. In a production of *Splendid's* goldfish bowl placed on stage signifies the stereotype in which the gangsters are trapped⁷. On the one hand form

¹ Monod, *Les Bonnes*, Compagnie de Saint Etienne, March 1971.

² Brigitte Salino, 'La Pièce que Jean Genet aurait voulu détruire', *Le Monde*, 20 January 1995. She writes about Stanislas Nordey's production of *Elle* at the Théâtre des Amandiers, Nanterre, Paris, 1995.

³ Jean Genet, *Les Nègres*, with photographs by Ernest Scheidegger of Roger Blin's production at the Théâtre de Lutèce.

⁴ Footnote, p. 53. This detail underscores the similarities as opposed to the differences between the two races. Both are caught in a theatrical bind of inauthenticity.

⁵ In addition, Victor Garcia's 1969 production of *Les Bonnes* in São Paulo takes place in a cage suspended from scaffolding.

⁶ Marcel Delval, *Les Bonnes*, 1979, and Bruno Bayen, *Elle*, European Theatre in Parma, Italy, at Parma Festival, 1989.

⁷ Klaus Grüber, *Splendid's*, Théâtre de l'Odéon de l'Odéon, 1995.

produces meaning, and on the other form is an inescapable goldfish bowl into which society peers. Both Genet and his directors convey this duality of simultaneous celebration and desperation.

With *Les Nègres* Genet's formalisation of space extends in all directions. The play is to be staged '*dans un théâtre en plein air*' (p. 9). The White Court perches on the branch of a tree. Space is criss-crossed horizontally by the branch and then vertically and diagonally by the vines used by the Court members to descend to stage level. Should the production take place in a theatre instead of in the open air, the branches should be replaced by a narrow raised platform that surrounds the whole stage. This platform constitutes an exoskeleton that is then filled by '*quelques gradins avec paliers de différents plans, à droite et à gauche. L'un d'eux, très au fond vers la droite, est plus élevé*' (p. 9). Genet's occupation of space has clearly developed since *Haute surveillance* and *Les Bonnes*, where the main volume of the stage is not occupied.

The set of *Le Bagne* constitutes a turning point in Genet's scenographic dramaturgy. Genet's theatre is transformed visually into theatre-on-the-theatre, as he exposes the mechanics of theatrical production by constructing the set before the spectator's eyes. Two men assemble the guillotine on stage by carrying on its components, and bolting them together (pp. 31-34).

The concepts of cramming the stage and of exposing the construction of form are explored fully in *Les Paravents*, Genet's most sophisticated play from the point of view of set. Here, the invasion of space with poetic form happens gradually before the spectator's eyes. The appended table serves to illustrate Genet's colonisation of scenic space (appendix B)¹. The set of *Les Paravents* begins quite simply at stage level. In the Fifth Tableau a platform is introduced, upon which the prison and later the court are situated. By the Ninth Tableau there are three levels and by the end of the play there are four, the upper three of which are each divided into three sections. Each section is represented by a screen often carried on by an actor, of course adding to the impression that the spectator witnesses the construction of the

¹ In the table each tableau is represented by a box (I, II, III, etc.). Boxes are split horizontally into the number of levels that appear in the tableau, and vertically into the number of scenes that exist on any one level.

spectacle. This insight into the process of theatrical production is paradoxical, for the self-conscious construction of the set is concurrently the deconstruction of the spectacle, for Genet draws attention to the falsity of his creation by showing how the set is built. He therefore forestalls the spectator's belief.

Each screen often comprises several panels. Genet stresses that the divisions between panels must not be concealed by paint: 'il fallait partir du paravent lui-même. C'est lui le point de départ, et ensuite en peindre les différentes branches.'¹ Form is self-consciously exposed. Before the spectator's eyes the scenic space is carved up by the set². Photographs of André Acquart's set for Blin's production depict the multiple vertical and horizontal lines created by the platforms. Acquart adds diagonal lines, with planks that lead to the levels, thus creating even more of a network effect. Props and costumes also enhance the web of lines. The Arab women in the village have parasols in tatters that resemble 'une toile d'araignée' and La Mère's make-up is drawn in long violet lines that cover her face like a spider's web³. The visual correspondences between set and costume add to the impression that space is being sliced through by forms. Genet hence shows the process and performativity of creating a theatrical production. His spectacle also becomes a metaphor for the fundamental process of meaning production. He codifies space before the spectator's eyes. On the one hand Genet appears, like Jackson Pollock on a canvas, joyously to hurl lines and shapes into the scenic space. On the other, I feel this celebration of form is somehow mitigated. Genet both celebrates the creation of poetic form, and at the same time reveals the anxiety of being bound in form, for his bid to fill the stage appears almost desperate⁴.

¹ Jean Genet, 'Lettre de Jean Genet à Jean-Louis Barrault', Munich, 18 April 1966, in *La Bataille des Paravents*, p. 56.

² On comparing the versions of *Les Paravents* it becomes apparent that revisions render the play even more multidimensional. In the revised version the prison and court are on a raised platform, splitting the scenic space vertically in two from the Fifth Tableau onwards, whereas in the first version the split does not occur until the Eleventh.

³ 'Commentaires du sixième tableau' (p. 71), and 'Commentaires du premier tableau' (p. 26). See also photographs of Roger Blin's production of *Les Paravents*, set designed by André Acquart, in *La Bataille des Paravents*, p. 26.

⁴ From a more thematic, metaphorical perspective, characters appear obsessively to tidy Genet's stages. Irma in *Le Balcon* insists that her clients tidy up after themselves. In *Les Nègres* Bobo is not allowed to throw flowers on the floor. The maids in *Les Bonnes* tidy Madame's apartment frantically after their ceremony (pp. 64 and 73.) The key to the bureau and the telephone receiver that they omit to tidy away are their downfall. Tidying might pose as a metaphor for the self-conscious process of meaning-

I have suggested that for Copeau the set should not detract from the actor's performance. In *Les Paravents* and *Les Nègres* the set appears to share equal importance with all other aspects of Genet's theatrical creation. The set is as much a carrier of signification as the words, the rhythmic structures and the actor's body are. The set, like the actor's gestures and like costume, assists in exposing the mechanics of Genet's colonisation, by performing a codification of space as the spectator watches. Levels, sections and sub-sections are multiplied in an attempt to confer meaning on every corner of the stage. The elaborate network can be described as a kind of scenic lacework. This portrayal serves as a clear indication of the significance of the *féerie* and the *vide* in Genet's conception of set design, as I explain.

(iii) Scenic Lacework

In my last chapter I likened the acoustic dimension to Genet's rhythmic structures to odour. An odour is simultaneously the presence of smell and the absence of anything else. We simultaneously experience the smell and nothing: the *féerie* and the *vide*. The *vide* features heavily in his theatre, as a metaphorical backdrop that enhances the aura and presence of his theatrical images. An emphasis on the self-conscious construction of poetic forms on stage inevitably highlights the blanks that exist between the forms, and vice versa. These blanks represent metaphorically what lies beyond discursive form: nothing.

A structure of poetic signs for Genet has the consistency of lace. Lace is a recurrent motif in his works. It is the intricate, meticulous structuring of threads. But by definition it is made of holes. Lace, like the acoustic dimension of rhythm and like odour, is unique because it is simultaneously materiality and absence. The vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines created by set, gesture, movement and costume in Genet's theatre are like strands of lace that reveal the process of creating poetic images, and in turn reveal the gaps of 'nothing' they seek to conceal between the threads. The white Queen in *Les Nègres* says: 'Et je n'ai pas fini de me sculpter, de me denteler, de me travailler en forme de ruine. Eternelle' (p. 103). From a

production. Genet perhaps illustrates the desperate codification of chaos into signs by requiring his characters manically to tidy and order.

metaphorical perspective, lace prevails throughout Genet's oeuvre¹. From a non-metaphorical, material perspective, as Genet's dramaturgy evolves he literally transforms his sets into lace, by highlighting the multiplication of lines that zigzag his stages. Of course, by multiplying the number of lines Genet multiplies the number of crevices between these lines, thus further indicating the metaphorical *vide* between the instances of the *féerie*. Genet explains one of the main intentions of *Les Paravents*: 'Et la ruine! J'oubliais la ruine! Celle des dents cultivées à l'aiguille de Warda, et la ruine totale de la pièce.'² The more Genet reveals the blanks, the gaps between his poetic forms, the more weight he confers upon his forms. For this reason, the White Queen in *Les Nègres* and Genet himself in *Les Paravents* aspire to the consistency of lace.

Genet stipulates total darkness between each tableau in *Les Paravents*³. He says to Blin 'c'est dans les noirs que devra apparaître la vraie pièce aux spectateurs.'⁴ To my mind the total darkness is the metaphorical representation of a blank, that enables the spectator to appreciate the celebration of forms that Genet elaborates when the lights are up. Genet's elaborate lace-making project culminates with *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents*. When at the end of *Les Paravents* the audience is confronted with the totally emptied stage, it realises that for the duration of the performance Genet, with his elaborate structuring of set, word and gesture, has created form, beyond which he proposes nothing: only darkness and holes, both of which metaphorically represent the *vide* - nothing.

Platforms, partitions and screens all create a three-dimensional lattice trellis that celebrates poetry production, and yet underscores its own artifice through the

¹ Examples include the Bishop's 'beaux ornements, chapes, dentelles...' in *Le Balcon* (p. 21); Irma's 'mouchoir de dentelle' and her 'déshabillé de dentelles' (pp. 73-4); the lace handkerchief with which Saïd mops his brow when walking to his wedding in *Les Paravents*; Warda's picking dirt from between her teeth with a hatpin, whereby she states that she is making herself into lace; the lace sleeve Genet describes in Rembrandt's *La Fiancée juive* ('Le Secret de Rembrandt'). And the manner in which Giacometti scores his canvases with an infinite number of tiny lines that simultaneously etch his subjects in steel and yet leave them to hover above a non-essential uncertainty, reflects the Genetian notion of lace as the concealing and revealing of a *vide*. From a more thematic perspective, in *Les Paravents* Leïla is obsessed with holes. She prefers the holes in her blanket to the shreds of material.

² *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 16.

³ 'Quelques indications', p. 10.

⁴ Blin quotes Genet in his 'Souvenirs et propos' (p. 38). Blin explains that the lighting effects Genet requested were abandoned because they prevented dramatic dynamism (p. 20). The concept of light and dark representing codification and chaos is nonetheless interesting.

overt performance of production. The intricacy of a lace pattern allows each person to follow a different thread from the multiplicity of strands; to see a different pattern. Genet's sets are a celebration of mobility within the fixed framework of discourse. The plurality of directions in which the spectator can look overcomes the dictate of a monolithic, predominantly textual performance. Genet exercises the same process of multiplication on colour, for the same desired effect: inclusion, rather than exclusion of difference.

(iv) Black and White to Multicolour

I have described Genet's scenography in terms of an evolution that spreads out into space. Genet's use of colour also evolves from one play to the next. Colour explodes into a disparity of tones as his plays develop. Colour is made to represent its own material dimension. Its plurality of tones is another element in Genet's non-hierarchical approach to all form, for by *Les Paravents* no single colour predominates, in his pagan theatre of multicolour.

Genet's first plays are quite monochrome. For *Haute surveillance* Genet requests an all black-and-white set and costumes: '*Donner aux décors et aux costumes (bure rayée) des couleurs violentes. Choisir des blancs et des noirs très durs*' (p. 12). In *Les Bonnes* the monotony of the maids' black and white uniforms is broken only by the odd splash of colour from Madame's wardrobe. In *Splendid's* the gangsters all dress in black and white tuxedos and Genet does not request any particular colour for the hostage's dress. In *Le Bagne* black and white also predominate. The Blacks are dressed in black uniforms, and Franchi in a white shirt, trousers, shoes and hat and a black holster. In none of these plays does Genet specify the colours that should be used for the set. He thus either structures colour by limiting its range, or else he has not as yet focused on the multiplication of colour on stage and its potential effects.

In *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents* conversely, Genet draws attention to colour by flooding the stage with a plurality of hues and tones. In the 1961 version of *Les Paravents*, while pinning multicoloured medals onto a huge mannequin, Madame Bonneuil utters words that provide an insight into Genet's approach to colour: 'autrefois, m'a-t-on dit, la fête nationale n'avait que trois couleurs, maintenant elle en

a un nombre incalculable.’¹ In the case of this play, colonial power is represented by only the three colours of the *bleu-blanc-rouge*. Genet appears to represent the surmounting of one single Aristotelian, Western, colonial common belief, by exploding the three colours into thousands of hues and shades. Like the grotesque style of the actors’ gestures and movements, the costumes of *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents* are a clownesque, hybrid potpourri of colours, styles and fashions deriving from a multitude of cultures, classes and nationalities. The costume designer for Maréchal’s production of *Les Paravents* takes part in the heterogeneity of colour and costume when writing:

Ma règle de départ étant de suivre à la lettre les indications de Genet qui ménage toujours la liberté du créateur dans l’outrance des oppositions. Orient-Occident. Tradition-actualité. Pauvreté-richesse. Costumes-masques. Une façon de contrepoint qui laisse un grand espace à l’imaginaire.²

Multicolour helps to produce the plurality that outwits the imposition of any one monochrome, uniform style. I do not claim that multicolour metaphorically represents anti-nationalism. Instead, I feel it embodies plurality and the absence of one dominant ideology.

The hybrid, grotesque style of acting and costume that Genet cultivates is enhanced by colour. The costumes in *Les Nègres* must display ‘*de fausses élégances, le plus grand mauvais goût*’ (p. 20). They are an unlikely combination of tuxedos and yellow shoes, evening dresses and bare feet. In *Les Paravents*, as is clear from my tables, multicolour streaks through the play³. The costumes are a post-colonial mélange of colours and styles. The Arab rebels - Abdil, Malik and Nacir - are ‘*vêtus soit à l’européenne, soit à l’orientale, multicolores*’ and the Court usher wears a white djellaba, a Western jacket and a green turban (p. 143). Styles and colours of clothing mismatch in the same way that gesture and movement do, to show the multiple external effects and illusions projected onto us by society.

In my last chapter I stressed that Genet does not adhere to a Cratylist, naturalist perception of phonemes. His conception of colour is equally non-essentialist, and to that extent it is not metaphorical. Saïd wears a ‘pantalon vert, veste

¹ 1961, Douzième tableau, pp. 118-139.

² Nathalie Prats, costume designer for 1991 production of *Les Paravents* at Théâtre Nationale de Marseille, directed by Marcel Maréchal. She writes this comment in the programme for the production.

³ I highlight the occurrences of multicoloured props in italics.

rouge, chaussures jaunes, chemise blanche, cravate mauve, casquette rose', and his mother wears a 'robe de satin violet, toute rapiécée de violets différents, grand voile jaune', and walks barefoot with each of her toes '*d'une couleur - différente - violente*' (p. 17). And M. Blankensee has a red moustache and side whiskers, yellow and black striped trousers and a purple dinner jacket. Attempting to attribute specific metaphorical signification to each colour would prove impossible. The multiplication of colour is of greater metaphorical significance than the colours themselves. Multicolour represents its own plurality. Like everything and everyone in Genet's poetic creations, colours also represent the potential mobility of all form. Colours are not only freed from metaphorical signification, they are also released from denotative meaning. In *Les Nègres* the colour black no longer signifies the black race. In order for Village to play a black man, Bobo must paint him. But Genet states that the polish can be of any colour at all (p. 9). In one production of the play, all the actors are painted green, and resemble iguanas¹. Colour is dislocated from its signified, with varying significant effects.

Genet illustrates the Gauguinesque freedom to employ colours, with disregard for their conventional denotation. And yet, he does not charge his colours with new signification. The colour green in *Les Nègres* is prevented from becoming the new 'black', with all the accompanying connotations, because the following time Bobo paints Village's face, there is nothing preventing her from using blue, purple or orange make-up. Colour, liberated from denotative and connotative obligation, is hence freer to exist more fully and materially as colour. Colour, or rather *colours*, are hence of central importance to Genet's theatre, for they signify a freedom to reconfigure, and also a freedom from configuration, for colours can represent their own material presence instead of simply colouring objects and people. The spectator is therefore at more liberty to reconfigure colours through his/her own grid of codified perception.

Genet thus reconfigures actor, voice, colour, and finally objects, as I illustrate.

¹ *Les Nègres*, Bordeaux, 1988.

(v) Props - Duality and Theatricality

For Artaud, everyday objects are infected with the banality of defunct ceremony and are hence banned from the stage. For Genet, these symbols of the everyday constitute the only definition of our socialised existence we will ever recognise. But Genet perhaps rejuvenates these objects more successfully than Artaud would have done, by allowing them to represent whatever he chooses, and secondly to represent themselves, their own material form.

In his letters to Blin, Genet tells his director to ask a clinically insane person to depict Sir Harold's orange groves on the screen for *Les Paravents*: 'Je crois qu'un obsédé sexuel jusqu'à la folie, et qui n'aurait jamais vu d'orangers, ni même d'oranges, inventerait une orangerie plus vraie que personne ne le fera' (p. 14). The relationship between the symbol and its referent is unsacred. It is therefore irrelevant whether or not the insane person has set eyes on a real orange grove or not. Representation on Genet's stage is not mimetic reproduction. The screens become incantation, according to the definition I elaborated in Chapter Five, for they represent both the Sir Harold's orange trees, and their own colour and shape, their own materiality.

Genet's wilful transformation of objects is illustrated in no better way than by his ingenious exploitation of paper screens in *Les Paravents*, as I discuss.

(a) Screens

The paper stretched across Genet's screens provides him and his actors with relative creative freedom within the wooden frames that evoke the limitations of discursive form. As my tables illustrate, in *Les Paravents* the screens can represent a road, a desert, a house, brothel or prison interior, a prison or courtroom or brothel exterior, a village square, town ramparts, an orange grove... (appendix B). Sometimes the screens remain blank, this perhaps enabling spectators to project their own images onto them, or perhaps, like darkness or an empty stage, serving as a blank backdrop that further sets off the beauty and intricacy of Genet's poetic forms.

The screens are of primordial importance in Genet's theatre for several reasons. I have illustrated how the self-consciously visible lines between their panels become strands in the three-dimensional lace pattern that illustrates the process of

form production. The screens also constitute form and materiality in addition to this, because the non-naturalist painting style inevitably affords an opacity to the signifier. The disregard of the depiction with respect to its signified draws the spectator's attention as much to the process of depiction, namely the application of colour and shape, as to the referentiality of the pictures. The screens therefore constitute materiality, in addition to being a metaphor for the artifice of all representation.

The screens are in addition extremely effective from a dramatic perspective. In the first instant they are a simple and efficient way of suggesting a scenic location. Once the audience has learnt the place a screen represents, Genet need only wheel on that screen again, for the same place to be evoked¹. The screens are not only convenient, but also highly theatrical, since their artifice is revealed, and not concealed. The audience simultaneously believes them to represent a brothel, shack or cactus desert, and knows them to be wooden frames divided into panels and covered by paper. In Chapter Five I illustrated how the scene between the Gendarme, Leïla and La Mère revolves around a clock that is nothing more than brush strokes on a screen. I also showed how in *Les Nègres* accumulation of fictitious detail enables the spectators to believe that Village has to travel a great distance, when he is only two steps away. Genet exploits this potential for the theatrical state of belief and disbelief to a maximum in *Les Paravents*. When La Mère and Leïla arrive at Saïd's prison, La Mère is '*essoufflée, et s'épongeant avec un chiffon qu'elle jette à Leïla*', whereas the audience knows that the screen depicting the prison is only meters away (p. 56). And when the Arabs set fire to Sir Harold's orange grove, they blow on the flames drawn on the screens to fuel the blaze, and Sir Harold can even smell marmalade. The spectator oscillates between being absorbed by the world of illusion, and being reminded that this world is but illusion, for the prison, the burning trees and all the other depictions are clearly but depictions. Genet's theatre is the state of total belief within the bounds of total disbelief.

Genet's illustration of the process of meaning production is enhanced when his actors paint objects and scenes on the screens before the audience's eyes. Leïla's clock for example is drawn by her '*à l'aide d'un fusain qu'elle a pris dans sa poche*',

¹ See Tableaux Fourteen and Sixteen of my table (appendix B), that feature screens with which the audience is already familiar.

as the audience watches (p. 96). I illustrate in my table how the cycle of day and night is represented by actors drawing suns and moons on the screens¹. The Arabs raze Sir Harold's plantation to the ground by engulfing the painted trees in painted flames (p. 111). The atrocities committed by the rebels are evoked via pictures of rape, torture and murder that the Arabs graffiti frenziedly onto the screens (p. 155). And the Lieutenant draws his military sorties on a screen (p. 179). Action in the play becomes a picture on a piece of paper. It literally becomes image and surface. Revolutionary action, colonial power, even the natural cycle of night and day become ceremonious performativity, a *féerie* composed of paper and brush strokes. For Genet, our life is no more or less of a social construct.

Genet highlights both the fixity of the image, for the images on the screens are immutable, and also a potential mobility and creativity. The actors are limited to painting within the frames, and they must use paint and paintbrushes. However, their drawings will be different for every performance. Genet thus illustrates the tension between our imprisonment by social discourses and our relative freedom for reconfiguration inside these discourses. Mirrors feature prolifically on the stages of Genet's plays. They are an integral part of Genet's sets and go one step further than painted screens, because they simultaneously represent the image reflected in them and the total mobility of this image, that changes according to what the mirror reflects. I explore Genet's exploitation of reflection mobility.

(b) Mirrors

Many studies are devoted to the significance of mirrors in Genet's oeuvre. Esslin's chapter on Genet in *The Theatre of the Absurd* is entitled 'Jean Genet - A Hall of Mirrors', and Richard Coe writes an article called 'All done with mirrors, or the Solitude of Genet'². Critics often explain the significance of mirrors in Genet's oeuvre in terms of the visual embodiment of the Existentialist dilemma³. Without

¹ See '**draws**'/'**paints**' highlighted in bold in the table. Examples include Habib depicting the setting sun on Sir Harold's plantation, or the Prison Guard painting a moon.

² Esslin, 'Jean Genet - A Hall of Mirrors', in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, and Richard Coe, 'All done with mirrors, or the Solitude of Genet', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 3, 1966, pp. 79-104.

³ See also Genet's ballet *Adame Miroir*, where the mirror reflections of the dancer are also played by dancers. Domino is not even a pretext for his image, he has no 'en soi'. He exists only in terms of his image.

denying the ontological dimension of the mirror in Genet's works, I highlight the immediate pertinence of the mirror from the point of view of the theatrical spectator, as opposed to the reader-philosopher.

The mirror contains the adamantine image that constitutes our reality. But the mirror, more than any screen, is capable of being reconfigured totally. Every time a new subject stands before it, a new image is created. The mirror is the quintessence of non-essentialism. In addition, the mirror reflection differs according to the angle from which it is viewed, and it is different each time it is observed. The mirror reflection embodies the mobility of the image within the fixed framework of a discursive reality.

Mirrors abound throughout Genet's plays. But by implication no two spectators can perceive the same reflection. And on no two occasions can the image of the character reflected be identical. In my last chapter I described rhythmic structures in terms of sequins, each one throwing the light out to the spectators in a singular way. Genet's stages are filled with reflective surfaces that present the non-essential evanescence of disparate, dispersed images. I have mentioned the mirror that remains on stage for each tableau in *Le Balcon*. Each customer, before changing back into his own clothes, takes a glance in this mirror¹. Mirrors also feature at many other instances in Genet's theatre. *Les Bonnes* begins with Claire-as-Madame admiring herself in a hand-held mirror. In *Splendid's*, Riton admires his own reflection. Other reflective surfaces also prevail, from the General's patent boots in *Le Balcon* to Claire-as-Madame's in *Les Bonnes*, to Vertu's in *Les Nègres*, to the bayonets and tin dinner bowls that the guards in *Le Bagne* obsessively buff, to Warda's jewellery in *Les Paravents*... Mirrors are therefore metaphors of ontology because they represent the image and its non-essential mutability. They are also theatrically effective because light is cast off them and into the audience in a multitude of different directions. Each spectator is therefore afforded a unique view.

Genet leaves no corner of his set uninscribed by his poetic signs. And yet he leaves space for inscription by the spectator. His platforms, screens, colours and props

¹ 'En attendant le moment de rentrer chez eux, ils se regardent dans les miroirs' says the Chief of Police, (p. 111).

are refracted into a rainbow shower of sparks that shine a different spotlight on each member of the audience.

III. Conclusion

‘When a play fails on its opening night, one can see that the actors have their rhythm, that each member of the audience has his own rhythm, and that all these disparate movements never harmonise with each other’, writes the director Peter Brook¹. Genet’s stage is exploded into an almost ‘Cubist’ disparity of heterogeneous tempos, pitches, gestures, movements, levels and sections, colours, styles and costumes that are shaped by the force of different separating elements in time and space². Genet’s multiple poetic forms refuse the terrorism of one unifying Brookian rhythm. Their resistance to global signification affords them an opacity that enables them to represent their own surface materiality. Lace enables the eye to follow its threads in a multiplicity of different directions. Similarly, the spectator of Genet’s theatre follows a chosen visual or acoustic thread through the play. A spectator could align Saïd’s pink cap with his flamingo stance, and with his first utterance, ‘rose!’ (p. 17). Another could align ‘rose!’ with Warda’s name³. The possibilities are endless. The monolithism of unidimensional plot and character-based theatre is exploded like fireworks in every direction across the stage, into a disparate plurality of artificially quintessential signs that seek to involve the spectator.

Genet’s self-conscious colonisation of space celebrates the artificial forms he adds, layer upon layer, to his stage. His theatre-on-the-theatre exposes the mechanics of meaning production both on stage and off stage. The falsity of image production is

¹ *There are No Secrets*, p. 37.

² In the programme for his 1991 production of *Le Balcon* at the Théâtre de l’Odéon, Lluís Pasqual makes the following reference to the Cubist movement with respect to Genet’s work:

l’impossibilité de distinguer le vrai du faux, cette ‘indécidibilité’ ultime qui mine tout système formel constitue l’infime faille par laquelle la vie s’immisce, fragile et obstinée. A la fin, elle fait tout exploser. Une nouvelle réalité en résulte, fragmentaire. *Le Balcon* est une pièce cubiste.

Although I disagree with Pasqual’s real-false dichotomy, it is true to say that Genet’s refusal of coherence between disparate fragments is reminiscent of Cubism.

thrown out into the audience to expose the theatricality of all action. Our bodies, our voices, our movements, our surroundings are the collision of socially projected chance elements, in the same way that Genet's grotesque characters are the product of mismatching colours, clothes and gestures.

In 'Le Secret de Rembrandt' Genet describes the experience of looking at *La Fiancée juive*: 'tout cela, dis-je, renvoie d'abord à la main, à la manche, puis à la peinture, sans doute, mais à partir de cet instant, sans cesse de l'une à l'autre, et dans une poursuite vertigineuse, vers rien' (p. 37). In his later paintings Rembrandt breaks with the traditions of portraiture, by drawing the spectator's attention to the texture of paint, more than or as much as to the portrait subject. Rembrandt thus underscores the art, craft and artifice of his own creation. For Genet, the portrait subject becomes insignificant if one concentrates on the brushstrokes and slabs of colour Rembrandt applies. Similarly, on his stages Genet creates poetic images and exposes them as only image and myth. Through tautological double-crossing Genet's theatre becomes the actualisation of the virtual and the virtualisation of the actual. It is a game that exposes the falsity at the heart of our purely discursive and hence 'tragic' existence, and yet laughs, for this is our only option. Genet creates language, gesture, set and costume and exposes them as only the language, gesture, set and costume.

*

I end this dissertation by stating whether I feel Genet's theatrical creations are ultimately a pessimistic indictment of the inevitable falsity of all form, or a celebration of the poetic creativity afforded by an absence of essence. Genet writes that the inevitable submission to form '[le] ravit et [le] désola'¹. Is the 'rien' towards which Genet states that Rembrandt directs the spectator's eye, a lamenting of the absence of any inherent truth, or is it an emancipatory celebration of this absence?

¹ I employ this quotation from *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (p.177) in Chapter Five.

Conclusion

A Celebration of Nothing

*Ça bouge encore*¹

Jean Genet, *Les Paravents*

Artifice subtends every phoneme, word and movement in Genet's theatrical world. An empirical 'real', a lucid transitivity of consciousness do not exist for Genet. In this dissertation, I have shown how Genet peers metaphorically through the smoke screen of illusion, only to see the empty blank of the *vide*.

Beyond representation Genet does not discover an Artaudian vortex of liberated unconsciousness that yields the savagery of 'real' experience. He discovers nothing. Genet's prolific use of the visual and acoustic - colour, gesture, movement, set, rhythmic structures - is not a paroxysmal foray, an attempt at transmental transmission without recourse to the inevitable distortion of representational signs. On the contrary, for Genet our socialised existence attains consistency only through semiotic codes, and the non-verbal is no less codified than the verbal. On his stage no colour, prop, item of clothing, movement, gesture, tone or pitch is left to chance. Every element is semiotically charged.

Theatre is the optimum location in which Genet can expose his, and our worlds as artifice and material form, because by definition theatre *is* both artifice and material form. Theatre is the incarnation of falsity in the spectator's 'real' life.

Without discursive form eyes do not perceive, minds do not conceive. Genet consequently overtly colonises his metaphorical *vide* of absence with artifice. Throughout this dissertation I have displayed the way in which webs of meaning criss-cross the stage. Visually, Genet's vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines are proliferated, as he adds walls, platforms, screens, curtains, balconies, hairstyles, costumes and make-up. Acoustically, his meticulously elaborated rhythmic structures are released into the auditorium, likewise invading space. The total, self-conscious structuring of every scenic element exposes total artifice, and concurrently creates total presence.

¹ This, along with *La Mère* was one of Genet's originally proposed titles for *Les Paravents*.

Genet dresses his stage in a multitude of lines, shapes, colours and sounds, only to uncloak the falsity of our existence. People are unmasked as actors, words as repeated lines, life as artifice. I conclude however by stressing that Genet's obsession with the artifice of form is positive, jubilatory and redemptive, and not pessimistic or nihilistic.

(i) Nothingness and Nothing

'Lire Genet c'est faire un pacte avec le Diable', writes Sartre. 'Que donne Satan contre une âme? Rien.'¹ Behind the falsity of Genet's literary creation lies nothing according to Sartre. Sartre also writes in *Saint Genet, Comédien et martyr*: 'quand les mots se brûlent et tombent en cendres, il ne reste que le néant; c'est un rhétoricien' (p. 568). According to him, Genet shows us no 'Être', only the 'Néant'. Sartre's interpretation would consist in saying that the subject does not signal through the flames while being burnt at the stake erected by ideological discourses. Stanley Esskin accuses Genet of holding a grim fascination with the stultifying capacities of the symbol. And according to Malgorn, whereas other avant-garde writers maintain a centre of vitality against which to measure their pessimism, futility and irony, Genet's works are firmly anchored in sterility and death. He writes: '[Genet] struggles ponderously to create dramatic tension between nothingness and more nothingness.'² Guicharnaud, too, classes Genet as a nihilist. He states that Genet's theatre is nothing more than a great architectural and verbal decoration, a huge façade, a cathedral built in honour of nothingness. And Bernard Dort says: 'il ne dévoile pas un être : il démontre l'impossibilité de tout être.'³

It is true that in Genet's world transcendence, 'real' communicational exchange and 'authentic' action are replaced by overtly scripted words and gestures that revolve in perpetuity around a 'champ clos', an inescapable discursive superstructure. With reference to the Tenth Tableau of *Les Paravents* Genet writes:

Trop d'épines nuisent, et M. Blankensee ne paraît pas s'en douter. Son métier c'est la comédie, pas la culture des roses. [...] S'il travaille à la beauté des épines ou pourquoi pas des pines plutôt qu'aux fleurs, M. Blankensee, à cause même de cette erreur, par moi commise, quitte la roseraie pour entrer dans le Théâtre.⁴

¹ *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr*, p. 575.

² Stanley Esskin, 'Theatricality in the avant-garde drama: A reconsideration of the theme in the light of *Le Balcon*', *Modern Drama*, 7 (1964), pp. 213-222.

³ Bernard Dort, 'Le Jeu de Genet', *Temps modernes*, 15 (1960), pp. 1875-1884.

⁴ 'Commentaires du dixième tableau', p. 119.

Instead of tending to his roses, M. Blankensee tends to his thorns. But Genet's inadvertent mistake is convenient for the author. He can illustrate how the empty gesture, in this case tending to thorns, holds greater significance than the achievement of anything constructive, for example the cultivation of healthy roses. M. Blankensee's actions are pure theatricality. They serve no functional purpose. Action is presented as performativity as opposed to performance. For Genet, metatheatre underscores artifice both on and off stage. Genet's codes are *Verfremdungseffekte* that erase the line between the theatre and the world. His theatre-on-the-theatre triggers a process of recovery for the spectator, who is adrift amongst the swimming mass of roles in and out of which characters slip, as the myth of subject integrity is destabilised.

It is certain that artifice on Genet's stage is the only tangible symbol of our existence. However, I do not perceive Genet to be an egregiously self-indulgent nihilist. Sartre on the one hand writes that Genet provides his reader/spectator with 'nothing' - 'rien' - and on the other states that Genet reveals 'nothingness' - 'le néant'. But what is the distinction between 'nothing' and 'nothingness'? To my mind one term only applies to Genet's works.

To label Genet a nihilist is to underestimate the jubilatory quality of his theatrical creations. Genet's theatre is the triumph of the *féerie* and not of its metaphorical counterpart the *vide*, which he only creates in order to underscore further the success of his *féerie*. Genet does not present us with nothingness. He presents us with nothing.

In 'Ce qui est resté d'un Rembrandt' Genet writes:

Il va de soi que tout ce que je viens de dire n'a un peu d'importance que si l'on accepte que tout était à peu près faux. L'oeuvre d'art, si elle est achevée, ne permet pas, à partir d'elle, les aperçus, les jeux intellectuels. Elle semblerait même brouiller l'intelligence, ou la ligoter. Or j'ai joué (p. 25)¹.

Genet's networks of dissemination - his rhythmic structures, his colours, his shapes and his movements - represent nothing. Fragmentation of the actor's body through grotesque clownesque gestures, pitches and tempos; elaboration of a multiplicity of discordant heterogeneous rhythmic structures; constant polyphonic shifting... all free Genet's theatre from any transcendental unifying paradigm. The multiplicity of material signs on

¹ Genet's italics.

different incompatible levels do not mirror semantics or thematics, they do not compose coherent characters, they do not elaborate plot, they do not incite revolution, they do not embody any positivist, unequivocal, prelogical 'real'. The opacity of the signifier effects a splintering of the action into singular visual and acoustic moments, performance being recentred around *mise-en-scène*. Genet's poetic structures, situated within his vastly pluralistic repertory, are each accorded equal status, in a democratic festival of the sign that abolishes the hierarchical dictate of one overriding signification. Genet's is a theatre of *nothing* as opposed to nothingness.

Genet never denies the significance of human experience as Dort might suggest. A solely nihilist reading of Genet's theatre would render impossible a plurality of recuperative readings, and would constitute a vector of exclusion. Contrary to his interpretation, I feel Genet provides practical solutions that lead to a celebration of existence. We are the 'captifs' of representation, but Genet teaches us how to be 'amoureux'¹. His affirmation of 'nothing' is a form of liberation. His extrinsic theory of identity produces a celebratory cogency. For Samuel Beckett's characters, there is 'nothing to be done'². But for Genet's there is a wealth of creative potential to be exploited. The absence of essence allows for an ontological adventure of transgressional reconfiguration.

(ii) The Celebration of Nothing

An Artaudian voyage out of the 'champ clos' of perpetuated iconography and into the realms of so-called 'true' expression is not possible. But Genet nonetheless offers redemption. He wrings from the stagnated rites of our society a form of spontaneity and a profound beauty.

Genet explains a dynamic whereby developments in Rembrandt's painting technique determine the treatment of the portrait subject, and concurrently the portrait subject determines the painter's technique: 'une série d'autoportraits où nous pourrions lire l'évolution de sa méthode et l'action de cette évolution sur l'homme. Ça, ou bien l'inverse?'³ Forms of representation are not algebra. They are not programmed and

¹ The title of Genet's last, posthumously published work was *Un Captif amoureux*.

² Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. This quotation, uttered by numerous characters including Gogo, Vladimir and Pozzo, recurs throughout the play.

³ 'Le Secret de Rembrandt', p. 31.

predictable. The paradox of the Sisyphean cycle of life and death is not its absurdity, but its mobility, for no two repetitions will possess identical significations. This mobility within fixity is best explained by Genet himself. In *L'Etrange mot d'...* he describes an Italian funeral procession, where the cortège is preceded by people who mime the significant events from the deceased person's life. Genet writes: 'Qu'il [le cortège] devienne troupe théâtrale et qu'il fasse, devant le mort et le public, revivre et remourir le mort' (p. 177). Life is the repetition of rituals inherited from generations of dead ancestors. But these rituals can be repeated in a multiplicity of different ways, using an intricate series of variations; recreations. The original ritual is hence betrayed perpetually, for the relationship between the representation and what it represents is non-essentialist; non-sacred. Reconfiguration instils vivacity in death. The repetition of ritualised forms in Genet's theatre is celebration and not nihilism, for it is a mobilisation of fixity.

Genet refers frequently to his works as 'une fête'. *Le Balcon* is to be 'une fête joyeuse, un vrai carnaval'¹; *Les Paravents* is 'une fête dont les éléments sont disparates, elle n'est la célébration de rien'²; 'une joie, une fête nouvelles et encore je ne sais quoi'³; in *Le Funambule* Genet tells his tightrope walker: 'vous ne vivez que pour la Fête' (p. 35); the Italian cortège in *L'Etrange mot d'...* is a 'fête'. Genet's works are a carnival, a jubilation, a celebration in honour of the emancipation in relativity afforded by the arbitrariness of all representation.

(iii) Mobility through Reconfiguration

One of the titles Genet proposed for *Les Paravents* was *Ça bouge encore*. This expression hints at the playwright's dynamic of relative mobility within fixity. Signification is never permanent. 'On peut faire semblant de croire que les mots ne bougent pas, que leur sens est fixe', says Genet in *L'Etrange mot d'...* It is not solely words that are unstable: 'Les actes ne sont guère plus dociles', continues Genet (p. 177). Signification exists on an infinitely mutable site. When awaiting her rebel hero, Ommou in *Les Paravents* exclaims: 'Et s'il fallait chanter, chanter... S'il fallait inventer Saïd...

¹ Jean Genet in a letter to Bernard Frechtman, quoted by Bernard Dort, 'Une Extraordinaire jubilation', in *Les Nègres au port de la lune*, p. 107.

² *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 15.

³ *Lettres à Roger Blin*, p. 68.

S'il fallait mot par mot, ici et là, cracher, baver toute une histoire... écrite ou récitée... baver l'histoire Saïd...' (p. 268). Saïd the rebel does not exist, so Ommou invents the fiction. Significance is grounded only in its own self-perpetuating myth. The non-mandatory arena of performativity that creates signs enables a systematic reconfiguration of the signifier to become the driving force behind Genet's theatre.

In *Glas* Derrida highlights two ways in which Genet instils mobility in his texts:

Entre les mots, entre le mot lui-même qui se divise en deux (nom et verbe, cadence ou érection, trou et pierre) faire passer la tige très fine, à peine visible, l'insensible d'un levier froid, d'un scalpel ou d'un 'style' pour énerver puis délabrer d'énormes discours' (p. 3).

Derrida firstly indicates the potential for mobility provided by syntagmatic movement 'entre les mots' - from word to word and from form to form. In this study I have illustrated how Genet's tectonic shifting between forms constitutes an elliptical refusal of closure. Genet writes of *Les Bonnes*: 'On ne peut que rêver d'un art qui serait un enchevêtrement profond de symboles actifs.'¹ Genet's signs jostle with a multiplicity of other signs, in systems of dispersion. A singular expanded matrix clashes with others, as the texts shift from word to word, stress pattern to stress pattern, alliteration to alliteration, gesture to gesture, costume to costume, role to role. Derrida goes on to suggest ways in which mobility is created along the paradigmatic axis of the sign, when the signifier affirms its dislocation from the signified. Genet exaggerates this dislocation, in turn refusing the monolithism 'd'énormes discours' - ideological formulaism. On his stage everything is reconfigured. A general's monocle becomes the body of Christ. A sugar-lump becomes the Pope. A literal, direct utterance becomes oblique and indirect. An expected reaction to a statement becomes the initiation of another statement. A pimp becomes a queen. A noun becomes an adjective. Grammatical and lexical morphemes, phonemes and stresses become rhythmic structures. An actor becomes animal or human, man or woman, young or old, black or white. An actor's voice becomes a farmyard. Mirrors or screens become whatever they depict. Genet exploits the potential for mobility to a maximum, replacing the trite symbols of our existence with his own singular poetic reconfigurations, whilst

¹ *Lettre à Jean-Jacques Pauvert*, p. 11.

simultaneously surrendering to the ultimate fixity of the discursive constructs that shape the textual space of our existence.

(iv) Reconfiguration and Deification

Genet baptises signs through his reconfigurations. And with this sacred act, he becomes a saint, a god. He says to the tightrope walker in *Le Funambule*: 'Dieu ne serait donc que la somme de toutes les possibilités de ta volonté appliquée à ton corps sur ce fil de fer' (pp. 31-32). Genet reworks the narrative of theism. If God is omnipotent, by exercising all the powers of reconfiguration at his disposal, Genet too is deified.

Genet's biographer Edmund White discovers that throughout his life, Genet falsified his name very slightly on official documents, to 'Genest' or 'Genêt'¹. When attempting to resolve the mystery of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, Gérard Genette refers to naming as the 'acte de langage par excellence'². Naming is the ultimate act of performativity. Power is implicit in baptism. Through naming, Genet reinvents himself and the theatrical elements that fill his scenic space.

Sartre refers to Genet as a 'Saint', for Genet, like a Saint seeks to inscribe his existence with singularity, setting himself apart from the rest of society. Genet attains singularity not in spite of representational signs, but through them. 'C'est dans ma propre langue que je m'exprime, c'est sur elle que je veux agir', he says³. Genet transcends the fixity of forms by acting upon his language, by systematically adding layers of artifice to elements on his stage, multiplying their significations and effecting his own salvation, by momentarily leaving his mark, baptising everything on his stage. Derrida describes how Genet surreptitiously graffiti his name on everything that enters his texts:

Genet, par un de ces mouvements en *ana*, aurait, [...] silencieusement, laborieusement, minutieusement, obsessionnellement, compulsivement, avec les gestes d'un voleur dans la nuit, disposé ses signatures à la place de tous les objets manquants. Le matin, vous attendant à reconnaître les choses familières, vous

¹ *Jean Genet*, pp. 67-68.

² *Mimologiques*, p. 16.

³ 'L'Art est le refuge', p. 101.

retrouvez son nom partout, en grosses lettres, en petites lettres, en entier ou en morceaux, déformé ou recomposé.¹

During the course of this study, I have highlighted the way in which Genet poaches words and objects and makes them his own by renaming them. In the absence of God, he escapes absurdity by unveiling the god in himself. The ‘nothing’ that Genet shows us is the celebration of disparate, incoherent signs that represent themselves, as opposed to representing any exclusive transcendental meaning. Genet’s mobility within stasis is optimism without hope, it is ‘la gaieté qui n’espère plus.’² His redemption is both liberation and surrender. It is creativity within the confines of discourse. It is the demiurgical stoicism that transubstantiates Genet into a god.

Genet sanctifies himself. But the spectator is not left to remain a mere mortal. In one respect Genet’s theatre could be perceived as a shrine in honour of itself. But Genet allows the spectator to bathe in the same hallowed light that illuminates him.

(v) Sanctification by the Spectator

‘Soyez spectateurs. Nous serons sauvés par ça’, says Archibald in *Les Nègres* (p. 49). And likewise in *Les Bonnes* Claire-as-Madame says to Solange-as-Claire: ‘Il me suffirait de si peu et tu n’existerais plus’ (p. 27). The existential mutual ratification of identity extends to the author-spectator relationship. Genet relies on the audience’s simultaneous belief and disbelief to sanctify his reconfigurations. He explains that respect for the reader/spectator is central to his aesthetics of sainthood:

Il est certain que j’aimerais me débarrasser de la morale conventionnelle, celle qui sclérose, freine le développement et bride la vie. Cependant, un artiste n’est jamais totalement destructeur. Le souci de forger une belle langue, une phrase harmonieuse, présuppose l’existence d’une éthique, en l’occurrence une relation entre l’auteur et un lecteur potentiel. Toute esthétique contient une éthique.³

Genet’s aspirations towards his own deification are subtended by a subtle negotiation between the necessity to be both misunderstood and understood. Whilst Genet exercises the autocratic right to exploit the non-sacredness of the semiotic dichotomy, the

¹ Derrida’s italics. Derrida’s ‘mouvements en *ana*’ allude to Genet’s processes that involve ‘anagrammatisant des noms propres, anamorphosant des signatures et tout qui s’ensuit’ (*Glas I*, p. 58).

² ‘Quatre heures à Chatila’, p. 253. Genet writes with reference to the Palestinians’ auto-emancipation. Their acts bear a relative authenticity, despite the inevitable theatricality of all acts.

³ ‘Par lui-même’, p. 22.

spectator alone holds the powers to endorse Genet's singularity and to sanctify his poetry. The spectator ratifies Genet's creations through his/her state of simultaneous belief and disbelief.

Theatrical experience replaces the religious faith of the Eucharist upon which Genet states he bases all his theatre. Genet refuses total belief by alerting the spectator constantly to the artifice of his creations. The actor never becomes one with the role. The face, however stereotyped, is always discernible behind the mask. The screens are visible through the paint. Genet externalises the process of myth production. Materiality becomes an additional layer of artifice in a process of transubstantiation as opposed to substitution, ceremony as opposed to masquerade. Signs become incantation. Incantation is the multiple presence of discernible signifiers and signifieds that effects the theatrical experience which allows Genet to be revered as a deity. The theatricality of simultaneous belief and disbelief transfigures Genet's reconfigurations into hallowed creations that paradoxically point to their own heretical subversions.

(vi) Deification of the Spectator

Within the inevitable confines of discursive form, Genet exercises the powers of reconfiguration, thus immortalising himself. Genet is not however unashamedly hubristic. He also enables the auto-deification of the spectator. Genet's *Le Funambule* ends with the following words: 'il s'agissait de t'enflammer, non de t'enseigner' (p. 37). Genet's theatre is not didactic. It allows for relatively total hermeneutic plurality. The singularity of each spectator's unique reception of the performance leads to a thousand individual deifications.

I have shown how Genet does not globalise his poetic signs into coherent macro-systems. Rhythmic structures, pitches and tempos, gestures, movements, colours and objects are all displayed as unique ornaments. Genet's poetic structures are dispersed across his theatrical texts, fragmenting plot, character, movement, actor, set, utterance and rhythm. I have illustrated how fragmentation metaphorically illustrates the disparate social influences that shape us all. Fragmentation is also of primordial pragmatic significance, for it leaves interstices which the spectator can inhabit. Genet troubles the relation to metaphor. Each spectator is free to reconfigure the poetic signs. By concentrating on meaning production as opposed to meaning, Genet confers the power

to reconfigure on the spectator. This is Genet's *tour de force*. He writes 'en face de l'oeuvre d'art [...] il faut agir. [...] si je ne compose pas avec mes moyens, modestement, les vêpres de la *Beata Virgine* en même temps que je l'écoute, je ne fais rien, je n'entends rien.'¹ The eye and ear of each spectator is caught by a different polyphonic voice, a different rhythmic structure, a different platform on the stage, a different gesture, a different layer of costume, a different colour. Genet accords each spectator the power to recreate his or her own poetic world. Fractured mobility transubstantiates the spectator into a god.

Genet does not contemplate a redemptive escape from symbolism, for symbolism itself offers redemption. The incessant perspectival shifting between Genet's vast plurality of verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal forms excludes no spectator from the redemptive privilege of aesthetic creation. The disparate fragments of material form and verbal text, continuity and discontinuity, tradition and treason, fixity and mobility, roleplay and more roleplay, rhythm and its modification, the vertical and horizontal, vivacity and death, non-essence and artificial quintessence, belief and disbelief, metaphor and its resistance, individualism and universality, the *féerie* and the *vide*, all forming a panorama around the spectator, allows for a multiple reception and recreation that excludes nothing and embraces everything. In *Le Funambule* Genet writes:

Les escarpins rouges, l'écharpe, [...] sont brodés de paillettes d'or. Sans doute pour que tu étincelles, mais surtout enfin que dans la sciure tu perdes, durant le trajet de ta loge à la piste, quelques paillettes mal cousues (p. 22).

Genet does not accept the capacity of drama to effect repercussions outside the theatre. His multitude of poetic ornaments resists plot, purpose and politics. 'Seule triomphe l'esthétique de la scène', writes Monique Borie². But Genet's uniquely pluralistic theatrical creation goes a little further than pure, self-indulgent aesthetics. Each spectator takes away a tiny sequin, a tiny memento of non-exclusion.

¹ 'Par lui-même', p. 24.

² *Mythe et théâtre aujourd'hui*, p. 71.

Appendix A

The following extract from the Ninth Tableau of *Les Paravents*, is analysed in detail in Chapter Five.

LA MÈRE La pendule a toujours été là; c'est mon mari qui me l'a ramenée de Maubeuge.

LE GENDARME *soupçonneux*: Combien de temps?

LA MÈRE *se levant*: Des années. Des années qu'elle est là, la pendule. Figurez vous qu'un jour, quand il était tout petit, Saïd l'avait complètement démontée. Complètement, pièce par pièce, pour voir ce qu'il y avait dedans, et tous les ressorts il les avait possés sur une assiette, il était encore tout petit, et juste je rentre, il y a de ça longtemps, vous pensez. Je rentre de chez l'épicier, et qu'est-ce que j'aperçois par terre... (*Elle mime.*) Mais réellement, comme une espèce de vermine qui voudrait se débiter: des petits roues, des petits étoiles, des petits vis, des petits vers, des petits clous, des petits machins y en avait plein, des harengs saurs, clés à molettes, cigarettes, trotinettes...

Pendant les explications de la Mère, Leïla se faufilait vers la sortie, mais le Gendarme se retourne et la rattrappe.

LE GENDARME *méchant*, Où vas-tu?

LEÏLA J'essayais de me sauver.

LE GENDARME Te sauver!... Foutre le camp!... Faire la malle!... Tirer des pattes!... Et moi, dans le coup, qu'est-ce que je deviens? Révocation. Je gagne la révocation. C'est pour ça que tu vas mettre les adjas? Pour que j'aie le brigadier au cul, si. Petite ordure. Et moi, trop con, qui te disais vous pour être poli, comme on nous le recommande! Ils en ont de bonnes, là-haut en haut avec leurs vous! Je voudrais les voir qu'ils vous touchent de près, comme nous les petits.

LA MÈRE Des petits? Vous autres, pour nous, vous n'êtes pas des petits.

LE GENDARME Heureusement qu'on vous a et que comme ça y a plus petit que nous, mais si on nous oblige à vous dire vous on sera bientôt plus petits que vous.

LA MÈRE De temps en temps vous pouvez oublier le vous et nous dire le tu.

LE GENDARME Surtout que vous aimez mieux ça, hein? Le tu est plus chaud que le vous et le tu protège mieux que le vous. Quoique si le tu protège, le vous de temps en temps fait du bien, ça je m'en doute.

LA MÈRE Un peu de vous, un jour sur quatre, et le tu le reste du temps.

LE GENDARME C'est mon avis. Le tu comme base et du vous goutte à goutte. Pour vous

habituer. Nous et vous on y gagne, mais le vous tout à coup, à qui dire le tu? Entre nous le tu est tu de copain, entre nous et vous le tu qui vient de nous est tu plus mou.

LA MÈRE

Juste. Le vous pour voous ça vous éloigne de nous. Le tu nous plaît, le s'il vous plaît n'est pas pour nous.

LEÏLA

Le mou non plus... Le tout non plou... Le vu non plus.

Elle rit. La Mère rit.

LA MÈRE

enchaînat: Le fou c'est vous... le plus c'est mou... c'est tout au plus...

Elle rit. Leïla rit. Le Gendarme rit.

LE GENDARME

Le mon c'est plou... c'est plus mon cul... Le cul mon coup... *(Ils rient aux éclats, mais soudain le Gendarme s'aperçoit qu'il partage ce rire. Il éclate.)* Silence!

Les Paravents, 1976, pp. 98-100

Appendix B

The following table serves to illustrate the manner in which the set of Les Paravents develops throughout the play.

I Sky blue screen with <i>multicoloured</i> palm trunk. Milestone in front. La Mère carrying <i>multicoloured</i> suitcase.	II Screen depicting brothel. Screen opens and closes in middle for characters to enter and exit.	III Screen depicting Saïd's hovel. Stool and bucket in front, <i>multicoloured</i> trousers suspended in air to left. <i>Multicoloured</i> blanket at window. Saïd's shadow appears on back wall of stage.	IV Screen depicting palm grove and bright sun. Wheelbarrow in front. Sun disappears and night falls.
V Steps leading to raised platform with screen depicting prison exterior and moon. <i>Multicoloured</i> blanket hanging from window. Prison guard draws moon on screen.	VI Screen depicting village square: palm tree, sun and hermitage. Chigha goes behind screen to urinate. Upturned umbrella in front. Large suspended moon moving across stage.	VII Screen on raised platform. Sun pouring through window cut out of screen. Huge Latin Koran in front, with lamp hanging above.	VIII No screens. Genet wants play to take place in real graveyard. Little watering can in centre of stage.
IX Screen depicting ramparts. Leïla draws clock on it. In front, zinc bowl, and lamp, etc. on table.	X Three screens: left and right front, centre back, each depicting orange trees. Arabs paint flames at base of trees. Night falls gradually.	XI Screen depicting M. and Mme Blankensee's window. One screen either side. PRI written on left-hand screen and SON on right.	XII Gold screen. Mannequin covered in decorations, ladder and telescope in front. Bastions of Western society appear on top of ramparts. Flags with fleurdelis. Arabs paint atrocities on screen depicting ramparts in centre stage. Larger screen appears to left. Even larger screen appears to right. Arabs draw on them.

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* I indicate Paris with 'P.', London with 'L', and New York with 'N.Y.', owing to the frequent occurrence of these places of publication.

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